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JOAQUIN, THE TERRIBLE.

The True History of the Three Bitter Blows that Changed an Honest Man to a Merciless Demon.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I.

A FAVORITE OF FORTUNE.

"MAKE your game, gentlemen—fortune awaits you!"

It was the same old monotonous cry that had regularly fallen from the thin lips of the dealer as he shuffled the cards for a fresh turn, but the words were purely mechanical now, and it may be doubted whether the speaker heard his own tones.

For nearly an hour the tide of fortune had been turned steadily from him, setting strong in favor of the handsome, dashing fellow who was now the center of an admiring, wondering crowd. It seemed almost a matter of course that each one of his daring ventures should be rewarded by success. So, at least, the bearing of the lucky gambler would indicate. He alone was careless and unconcerned. He cast down his gold in great handfuls, without counting the amount, or seeming to care on which card it rested. He hardly watched the turn of the cards, on each one of which a small fortune depended, but glanced carelessly over the crowd, puffed lazily at his cigar, or spoke a few idle words to those near him, his voice low and sweet as that of a woman.

Few, if any, of those present knew who this dashing gambler was. His dress was that of a native Californian, rich and picturesque. His form, features and complexion were in perfect keeping with his garb, yet he spoke the English language fluently and without the slightest trace of foreign accent.

At first he had been but one of a motley crowd that surrounded the *monte* table in triple ranks. Men of nearly every nationality under the sun were there, but gradually the number of players lessened, over-shadowed and frightened off by the seemingly reckless play of the Californian, until at length he stood alone fighting the bank, with admirable prospects of ultimately breaking it, unless the tide of fortune should speedily turn.

Wager after wager was won, and as the yellow pile before the unknown grew larger, the usually impassive dealer grew whiter and his smooth voice more husky. It was not his own money that he was losing, but he seemed to feel that he would be held accountable for this wonderful run of ill-fortune, and there was something of absolute fear in his dark eyes as he cast a quick glance around the room. But then, as if by magic, his manner changed, and he became once more the icy, imperturbable machine. His livid lips regained their natural color, his long, yellow fingers no longer trembled as they manipulated the cards.

Those who had deemed the favorite of fortune so careless, were now undeceived by a simple yet significant action. Clipping the end from a fresh cigar with a long, slender dirk, he drove the keen point into the table before him, leaving the bright steel to quiver there, ready to his hand.

Though so quietly performed, there was no mistaking the meaning of this action, but the dealer only showed his white teeth in a mocking smile. Plainer than words, the gleaming steel said:

"Beware! at the first hint of foul play, I will probe your heart to its innermost depths!"

The mute threat had no terrors for him now, for that one swift glance around him had been rewarded beyond his utmost hopes.

On the skirts of the eager crowd stood a tall man, richly but neatly dressed, his heavy beard of jetty black aiding the broad-brimmed and slouched hat of soft felt in disguising his features from close scrutiny. But his keen eyes met those of the dealer, and an almost imperceptible signal was telegraphed over the heads of the spectators.

"All right. Win or lose, keep him in play until I return."

Such was the message, and the will of John Vanderslice was law within the walls of the "Wheel of Fortune."

Who was this brigandish-looking John Vanderslice? The question had found utterance many times, only to receive almost as many different answers. That he was a gambler, and the proprietor of the "Wheel of Fortune," a gambling-hell quite as notorious, if not as luxuriously fitted up, as the far-famed "Bella Union," nearly everybody knew, but beyond this, all was uncertain speculation.

The moment he saw that his silent message was understood by his dealer, John Vanderslice turned away from the crowd and left the

room, making a silent, peculiar signal as he did so.

Passing around the corner of the building, he reached the rear, unlocking a narrow door. A soft light shone across the dirty, foul-smelling alley as he entered, falling upon a slender, crouching figure that seemed to be dogging his footsteps, but John Vanderslice betrayed neither surprise nor alarm.

"Come in, Creeper," he said, in Spanish, holding the narrow door sufficiently ajar for the slender form to slip through, then turning lock and drawing bolts.

"You called me, and I came," uttered the man, crouching before his master, like a slave, or one who found it impossible to assume an erect posture.

"Yes, there is work to be done."

"On the winner—knife or garrote?" was the quick response.

"Sit down. Drink and smoke while I tell you. There is no hurry. Diego Cagatinta has the cue, and will keep the fellow in play until he is needed."

While speaking, John Vanderslice placed liquor and cigars upon the little round table, then sunk into a chair, motioning the Creeper to a seat opposite.

There was the strongest possible contrast between the two men as they sat facing each other.

John Vanderslice was a trifle over six feet in height, and his form was a model of manly grace and muscular symmetry. Now that the necessity for concealment no longer existed, he cast aside his slouched hat, baring his head and face to the soft light that fell from the crystal-shaded lamp hanging from the ceiling. His hair was worn long and in slightly curling locks. These, with his luxuriant full beard, were jetty black, save where streaked by an occasional gray hair. Where nineteen observers would have pronounced him faultlessly handsome, the twentieth would have detected the shifting, treacherous light in his black eyes, the moral weakness in his retreating forehead, his too fleshy nose and sensual mouth.

Stretched perfectly erect, the man seated opposite would have measured scant five feet from sole to crown, while his habit of crouching took nearly another six inches from his stature. In either face or figure it would have been a difficult task to find a more repulsive creature than this same "Pepe the Creeper." His skinny face disgustingly resembled that of a hungry rat, both in shape and color, while the short hair, more nearly resembling fur, upon his skull, was of a dirty drab color that aided in carrying out the likeness.

From head to foot he was clothed in a grayish suit of tanned skins, dirty, greasy and blotched here and there with rusty-looking stains that might have been, and probably were, caused by blood, human or animal.

His voice was low, but shrill and squeaky. "Pepe the Rat," to the outward eye, would have suited him more nearly than "Pepe the Creeper," but those who had first bestowed the latter title, knew well their subject.

The room in which these two strangely contrasted men were seated, was a marvel of luxury and richness for that time and place. For, be it remembered that San Francisco, at the date of this strange life history, was yet in its infancy. The first mad rush of the gold fever was still raging, and few men had time for aught other than money-making.

The walls were hung with rich velvet paper, the floor carpeted with Brussels, the walls hung thick with oil paintings worth a fortune in themselves. The elegant sideboard was laden with crystal glasses and decanters. Richly ornamented weapons hung here and there. A heavy safe stood in one corner, near the head of a mahogany lounge.

Pepe the Creeper eyed these items with curiosity and interest in his rat like eyes, for never until now had he been admitted to the *sanctum sanctorum* of his chief.

"You do not drink, Creeper," added John Vanderslice, as the Mexican toyed with his full glass.

"Not before business, senor," squeaked the human rat. "I have not the big muscles of some, and wit and skill must serve me instead. Brandy is bad for both."

"Good!" was the approving exclamation as the gambler set down his own empty glass. "There is work before you, and harder, maybe, than you realize. You noticed that man—"

"The winner at *monte* against Cagatinta? Yes—I have been on his trail ever since noon."

John Vanderslice uttered a low exclamation of wonder.

Pepe the Creeper smiled ghastly.

"If he had not dropped in here of his own accord, I would have played the decoy, for I felt sure that you would give much to see him, senor."

"You know him, then?"

"Joaquin Murieta, when once seen, is easier remembered than forgotten, senor," was the quiet response.

"Ten thousand curses cover the dog! May the hottest flames of hell be his bed!" snarled the gambler, his face convulsed with fury, his

long fingers working like the talons of an enraged wild beast.

"Say the word, master, and I will soon start him on the trail that leads straight there!" hissed the Mexican.

By a violent effort John Vanderslice regained his usual coolness, outwardly, at least, though he did not venture to speak until after draining off another glass of brandy.

"Bold words, Creeper, far easier uttered than made good. Not that I doubt either your skill or courage, but if you know Joaquin Murieta, you must also know that he has the strength, skill and luck of a dozen common men."

With a low, squeaking laugh, the Mexican drew a long, double-edged knife from his boot-leg and held it before him.

"That has settled more than one man quite as good as he. I can split a hair or cleave a golden onza with it. One blow from behind in the dark—that is all."

"Nevertheless, it is wiser to run no risks. You must have strong and trusty hands near you, to lend their aid in case of need. I leave the choice to you, but take no less than two trusty men. Watch your chance, and all assail him at once. Strike home, and make sure work. The fellow has as many lives as a cat."

"If he had a thousand, he should sup brimstone with his father-the-devil this very night, since you wish it, senor."

"Be as good as your word, Creeper, and you shall not have cause to regret the trouble. What gold you find on the fellow shall be yours. Pay those who aid you, if there is enough. If not, come to me. But remember; my share in this work must remain a close secret between us two."

"Never fear, master. The *ladron* has won enough gold this night to cost him his life a dozen times over. The only trouble will be to keep other wolves off his track."

"Make sure work. The moment you have secured your men, show yourself at the door, and I will see that the game ends speedily," added John Vanderslice, donning his hat and unfastening the door.

The Creeper slunk silently away, and the gambler returned to the hall where the *monte* table was still the center of attraction.

It was clear that Dame Fortune had been more capricious during the interval, for though the stranger was betting even more freely now, the pile of gold before him had not perceptibly increased or diminished.

The experienced eye of John Vanderslice showed him one thing more. The gamester was growing weary of the amusement, and might at any moment "jump the game." But then he drew a long breath of relief as he caught a glimpse of Pepe the Creeper at the outer door, making the agreed upon signal that all was in readiness.

As though Murieta, too, had been waiting for this, he checked the dealer as that worthy placed a fresh "lay-out."

"One word, senor," and now the successful gamester spoke Spanish as fluently as he had hitherto used English. "I have an important engagement now nearly due, yet I do not like to quit a winner, without giving the bank a fair chance to retrieve itself. May I ask, is there any limit?"

Diego Cagatinta hesitated for a moment, but as he looked up, he caught the keen eye of John Vanderslice.

"No limit, senor. Place your wager and the bank will meet it," he said softly, in accordance with the silent telegram of the real banker.

"Good! this playing like children for petty stakes, is wearisome. So! I back the knave. I never was the favorite of the fair sex!" and he staked the pile of gold against the queen.

All around was breathless silence, the eager spectators holding their breath as they crowded nearer, peering over each other's shoulders as they stood on tiptoe, the better to see a fortune won and lost. Heavy betting was the rule, rather than the exception, for even in those early days, gold was plenty and flowed almost as freely as water, but it was seldom that such an enormous wager was laid on the turn of a single card.

Cooler and apparently the least concerned of all in the room, Murieta drew his dirk from the table to clip the tip from a fresh cigar, slowly lighting it as he watched the long fingers of the Mexican as he cautiously manipulated the cards.

Then—a long breath that was more like a sigh burst from the crowd, for the fateful card was drawn. In a low, husky voice, Diego Cagatinta uttered:

"*Cavalle en la puerta—Soto mozo!*" (The queen in the gate—knave wins.)

"Fortune is against you, senor," quietly uttered the successful gambler. "Yet I am not one to deny a bold man his revenge. If you prefer, deal on. I will put all my winnings on the knave once more!"

Instantly the confused hum which had greeted the winning of this heavy wager was stilled, and pale faced, wild-eyed with excitement to see the result of this proposed doubling of the enormous stakes, the spectators awaited the an-

swer of the dealer, who was counting the gold with fingers that trembled as with ague. He made no reply to the courteous challenge until the heavy debt was balanced, then his eyes encountered the blazing orbs of John Vanderslice.

Once more those eyes spoke in terms that could not be mistaken, and Diego Cagatinta slowly uttered the words most bitter for the lips of one of his occupation:

"Thanks, senior, but the fates forbid my accepting your challenge. *The bank is broken!*"

"I regret your misfortune, senior," said Murieta, with a polite bow. "It is my turn to-day, may yours come to-morrow."

Loud and tumultuous rose the cheers and wild yells of the excited crowd. Seldom was it that they saw a bank broken, especially one so well known, strong and lucky as this. For the moment this handsome favorite of fortune was a hero, but little less than a god. And yet, more than one hand was already stealing toward the left of a knife as Murieta shoved the heap of gold into his pockets, boot-legs and scarf. Their was murder in a dozen hearts, and lucky indeed would the successful gambler be were he to escape in safety with both gold and life.

No one more fully realized this than Murieta himself, and he coolly took the only course that could possibly have saved him from assassination.

"Gentlemen, be kind enough to drink my health!" he cried, tossing several handfuls of gold coin over the heads of the crowd, toward the end of the room furthest from the door.

When the mad scramble for the gold ended, the successful gambler had vanished from the room. But upon the bearded lips of John Vanderslice was the smile of a demon incarnate!

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE MEETING OF BROTHERS.

"HELP, senior—help, for the love of our Holy Mother!"

These words fell in a gasping cry from the lips of a woman who almost fell upon rather than touched the arm of a young man who had abruptly paused in his course, one hand falling upon the revolver at his hip with the mechanical readiness of one who had often been called upon to make use of the tool. Little wonder. The dark figure had appeared so suddenly, and in that gloom only the keenest eyes could have told the sex ere the little hands clasped his arm with such convulsive energy. Even this was scant assurance to the wise man. Even in broad daylight the streets of San Francisco abounded with traps and snares that too often ended in bloodshed and death, while at night the adventurous man who would explore the mysteries of the infant city, carried his life in his hand with even chances of losing it ere the new day dawned.

"Help, in the name of God, senior!" gasped the woman, as from the deeper gloom beyond there now came the sharp clash of contending steel, mingled with sounds of angry curses and rapid trampling of feet. "They will murder him—my husband!"

With a wailing cry, the woman turned and staggered away toward the spot whence emanated the sound of fighting. There was a terrible earnestness in her tones and actions that disarmed the suspicions at first entertained by the man whom she had accosted. All thoughts of a snare vanished, and whipping forth a revolver, he leaped swiftly through the gloom to the scene of fighting.

This was at the entrance to a narrow alley, dimly lighted up by rays which streamed across the street from the open door of an eating-house.

Feeble and uncertain though the light was, it proved sufficient to give the stranger a fair idea of the truth. One man, his back to the corner wall, was defending himself with more than common skill against the combined assault of four men, his short sword gleaming in swift circles before him, brushing aside with apparent ease the ugly knives that were seeking to slip within his guard.

At that instant the bold fencer executed a movement swift as light, disarming two of his assailants, and then, with a single stroke, clove the nearest skull fairly in twain. A gallant feat of dexterous strength, but one that came near proving fatal to the successful gamester—for the assailed was none other than he whom John Vanderslice called Joaquin Murieta. Swift and vicious as the rodent whom he so closely resembled, Pepe the Creeper darted in as his fellow fell dead, and struck full at the heart of his quarry before the Californian could recover his guard.

But he was dealing with no ordinary man. A swift twist of the body, and the keen weapon only glanced along the ribs of the gambler. And then—

The death of the one footpad banished the last trace of suspicion in the mind of the stranger. This was no trap set to catch him. A farce would not be played in such deadly earnest, and swift as thought his ready revolver began speaking.

At the first report, Pepe the Creeper fell in a limp heap at the feet of Murieta. Twice more

the unerring weapon exploded, and the fight was ended. Death-stricken almost ere they could realize this new phase of affairs, the evil-browed footpads fell helpless at the feet of the astonished gambler.

Until now the affray had attracted no attention outside of those more immediately interested. Even if heard, angry cries and curses were far too common in those days to excite any curiosity, and the grating of steel was not loud enough to reach the ears of those within the adjacent saloons. But when the sharp pistol shots rent the night air, loud cries and shouts arose from scores of half drunken throats, and eager to see if not take a hand in "the circus," scores of rough-clad men of a dozen different nationalities poured into the streets.

"To you I owe my life, sir," said the gambler, his voice as cool and even as though grim death had never crossed his life-trail. "While grateful for that, I am sorry that you should be mixed up in this unpleasant affair on my account. Those howling brutes will hunt us close. If you know the town well, escape while you can—if not, pray follow me."

At the first words, the man who had performed such swift and deadly work, started with amazement, then drew nearer the gambler, his eyes glowing like living coals. One keen gaze, then the recognition was mutual.

"Carlos!"

"Joaquin!"

Truly it was a strange and dramatic meeting of brothers who had been separated for years, and no wonder that their hands met in an ardent pressure that attested the fraternal tie was cemented by love quite as strongly as by blood.

But there was no time for more than that. Though they had clearly been in the right, both knew what deep and bitter prejudice the greater portion of the rough diggers entertained against those of their race. One word is enough to set a mob of such material in motion, and should any friend of the dead men raise the cry for blood, the chances were that the accused would be hung first and tried afterward, if tried at all.

"Come—follow me," muttered the gambler, one hand upon the arm of his brother. "With the scent of fresh blood in their nostrils, you pack of howling wolves would show but scant mercy. Besides, I have on my person gold enough to doom a score of our race to death at their hands."

Silently but swiftly the two men plunged into the dark and narrow alley, then made several abrupt turns, finally pausing when several hundred yards from the spot where the ambush had been sprung.

A moment of breathless listening, then a low, grating curse passed betwixt the close-clinched teeth of the gambler as he crouched low down, drawing his dirk.

From close behind them came the sound of footsteps, showing that they had been followed through all their turns.

"I am weighted too heavily to run—the knife must answer!" grated the gambler, as he leaped toward the follower.

There came the sound of a collision—then a faint, half-stifled cry, and instantly the Californian felt the powerful hands of his brother fasten upon his arm.

"Hold! do not harm a woman!"

"Mother of Mercy! you, Nicholas?"

"To her you owe your life, brother. But for her appeal, I would have hesitated to interfere—perhaps have passed by what I half-believed was a snare laid for me to enter. See—the poor child is fainting, or frightened half to death."

A short, peculiar laugh from the gambler as his arms wound closely, lovingly around the slight, trembling figure.

"You do not know, brother—how should you? This is my wife, and one hair of her head is dearer by far to me than my own life! But come—this is no place for explanation. We are not yet safe. Blood and gold have a strong scent for such nostrils—we will be looked for long and closely."

No more was spoken then, and the trio hastened through the narrow, crooked streets, keeping the center of the way, with drawn and ready weapons as though each step was taken at the risk of their lives.

And such, with scant exaggeration, may be said to be the case. Never was a town more full of crime and peril than San Francisco at that period, or during the second and third years of the gold fever. Nothing else could be expected. Thieves, thugs and assassins flocked to the Golden Gate from all parts of the world. Criminals of all grades swarmed like buzzards scenting carrion. Some of them settled down to hard work at the mines, but the great majority hovered around the large towns where they could prey upon those who had already made their fortunes. For the first year, crime—especially theft of any description—was almost unknown. Valuable property was left lying exposed to all for days and weeks at a time without any other guard than that of common honesty; but with the ticket-of-leave men and escaped convicts from Botany Bay, with criminals from the States, gamblers from

the big rivers, and evil characters from everywhere, this state of confidence rapidly shifted to the opposite extreme. And even more criminals were manufactured than imported. Men must live. Those who failed at the mines, those who were too weak or lazy to do hard labor, naturally drifted to the bad where so many and great temptations abounded. Theft, robbery and bloodshed became of daily, if not hourly, occurrence, and then was born the tribe of Road-agents. Already the storm was brewing that was to sweep the golden State, but more especially the city of San Francisco, with a besom of blood and destruction—in other words, the Vigilance Committee—but the hour for that popular outbreak had not yet arrived.

Thus carefully guarding against surprise, the trio passed swiftly on through the streets without any serious interruption, though they made several detours to avoid encountering parties of drunken miners, well knowing that their peculiar national costume would be the signal for rude railery if not actual violence, for the fires kindled by the recent war with Mexico had not yet entirely died out.

"Here, brother, is the house where I am now stopping. Come in and have your wounds attended to. My wife is here—"

Even as he spoke, the door of the small, rude building was opened by a fair young woman, whose loving ears had recognized the voice of her idolized husband.

Entering, the door was closed and bolted.

There was but one room, rudely furnished with bed, table and several chairs. Besides the door, the only other opening in the walls was one small window, containing only a single sash of six diminutive lights.

A tallow candle afforded the only light, but its rays were sufficient to reveal a fact that would have astonished and bewildered the keen-eyed gambler, John Vanderslice.

But for a slight difference in the hues of their rich, picturesque garb, not even the eyes of hate could have distinguished the successful gambler from his brother. As will be made clear in the proper place, John Vanderslice had ample cause for remembering Joaquin Murieta; yet both he and Pepe the Creeper had been mistaken. The man they believed to be Joaquin Murieta was his elder brother, Carlos!

Something more than a year before the date of this story Joaquin Murieta had wedded Carmela Felix, after a stormy and romantic courtship.* They settled down in Sonora, on the Murieta estate, but when the gold discoveries grew more and more extended, there came a letter from an elder brother, Carlos, who had been absent for years. It concerned a land-grant of four square leagues, conveyed by the Governor of California to the elder Murieta for valuable services rendered long before the Americans conquered the country. This grant lay in the richest gold-bearing portion of the State, and on the death of his father, Carlos, as next heir, set to work to look the matter up, only to find that, owing to some flaw in the title, the ownership of the land was disputed. The letter conveying these facts urged Joaquin to hasten at once to San Francisco, that together they might look up the necessary witnesses and prove the validity of their title.

Joaquin obeyed, but his young wife insisted on bearing him company. Reasoning and arguments were equally in vain, and so they journeyed to San Francisco, going blindly to meet their fate—as dark and tragical as ever the world witnessed!

But few words were spoken by any of the party until after the hurts of Carlos were laid bare and attended to. He had been cut in three places, but none of the wounds were much more than skin deep, though the one inflicted by Pepe the Creeper, just before he was struck down by Joaquin's bullet, was ugly-looking enough. The weapon, however, had glanced along a rib, thanks to the activity of the gambler, doing little harm beyond a copious blood-letting.

Carlos unburdened himself of his heavy winnings, heaping the gold upon the table as he briefly told how he had broken the monte bank at the "Wheel of Fortune."

"No doubt the *ladrones* followed me from there," he added, "though I thought I had secured a safe retreat by tossing the gold for them to scramble after. Still, I have seen too much of wild life not to be constantly on guard, and I had not taken a score of steps from the gambling house before I found that I was being dogged, for no friendly purpose, as I readily divined."

"Men who have followed my line of life, learn to think quick and straight to the purpose, and in an instant I made up my mind to trap the trappers. True, I might have entered some of the saloons, but that would only have delayed the attack, not defeated it. Then, too, I knew that the story of my breaking the bank would spread like wildfire, and I might be recognized from description by other *ladrones*. Better deal with four men than a score."

"My plan was a simple one, and hence the more apt to prove successful. It did suc-

* See DIME LIBRARY No. 154.

ceed in a measure, but the rascal who headed the thugs was no common thief, and thanks to his cunning, I was partly foiled.

"When I reached a comparatively lonely portion of the city, and saw that the *ladrones* were preparing to close in on me, I darted ahead at full speed and dodged into the first alley I came to, then stopping short and hugging the wall closely with *machete* in readiness.

"As I expected, the enemy came running after me, but instead of pressing on through the alley, or passing close to the corner where I stood, the leader, a lean, rat-like rascal, halted at the center of the passage and almost immediately discovered my position. Then—you know the rest."

"Thanks to this lady, yes," replied Joaquin. "Your wife, I believe you said, Carlos?"

"My wife of nearly two months, yes," and the handsome gambler drew the delicate-looking creature closer to his side.

"Nicholasa, this is my brother, Joaquin, of whom you have often heard me speak—the baby of our family."

The girl-wife stepped forward and impulsively pressed Joaquin's slender hand to her lips.

"I thank you, senor, for his life and mine—for I could not live without him. He is my all—my heart—my life!"

Deeply affected, Joaquin gently lifted her from the floor, as he might a child, and gently pressed his lips to her brow.

"My sister—you must find room in your heart for both Carmela and me. Truly, Carlos, we both should be among the happiest of men, for each has now an angel to brighten his life on earth."

This may sound highflown, but none who saw his face and heard him utter these words, doubted his perfect sincerity.

Joaquin in turn introduced his wife, and then, after due congratulations, Carlos turned to his girl-wife.

"You have not yet explained how you chanced to be on the street, so far from our lodgings, Nicholasa."

The poor child flushed hotly, for she knew that she could not acknowledge the truth without covering herself with shame.

Fairly idolizing her handsome husband, she was almost insanely jealous of him, though, to do the careless fellow justice, he had never yet given her cause for doubting his perfect fidelity. But she had heard of his past reputation, and sorrowed in secret over the many love affairs he had been engaged in before surrendering to her charms, and that evening when he took an early departure, the demon of jealousy urged her to follow him and forever set her maddening doubts at rest.

"Poor child! like the majority of her sex and race, her moral training had been very slack, yet she could not bring herself to utter a positive lie to the man she so idolized.

"It was a bad dream—a soul-sickening presentiment," she softly murmured, clinging closely to his manly form, her tear-dimmed eyes hidden upon his bosom. "I thought that something dreadful was going to happen, and so—I followed you."

"And you foolishly thought you could avert the peril with your weak arm, Nicholasa?" laughed Carlos, tenderly smoothing her soft, golden hair.

"And did she not?" a little sharply asked Joaquin, sympathizing with the trembling girl. "Only for her appeal you would have been left to fight it out against those four *ladrones*, unaided."

"The end would have been the same, only a trifle prolonged perhaps," was the cool, almost boasting response. "But I am grateful to you both. Go on, Nicholasa."

"I saw you enter that place, and then I watched the door," the girl wife resumed, with more courage. "After a long time some men passed near where I was hidden, and I overheard them planning to assassinate some one—you, I felt sure, though I could hear no names spoken. I believe I fainted, for I did not see you come out—only saw those men as they stole away after a man whom I felt was my husband. I followed—surely you are not angry with me, Carlos?" she added, brokenly, as Murieta removed her loving arms and stepped a pace aside.

"No; go on—tell the rest," he muttered, his face growing dark and stern, while one hand firmly grasped the long dirk and drew it from his girdle.

Joaquin seemed about to speak, but an impatient gesture silenced him, and Nicholasa tremblingly resumed her story.

But Carlos was not listening. He stooped over the table for a moment, then turned swiftly and flung his dirk through the window!

High above the crash of glass rose a human yell of agony!

CHAPTER III.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

SWIFT as thought Carlos turned again and his palm closed over the one candle, leaving the room in utter darkness.

open to any summons unless you recognize our voices. Come, Joaquin!" hastily uttered the gambler, all in a breath, as he unbarred the door and dashed from the room into the night.

All this had occurred so rapidly that Joaquin, usually so keen-witted and prompt to act, stood amazed. The strange demeanor of his brother while Nicholasa was telling her story; his hurling the dirk through the window, and the frightful screech of agony that followed; the smothering of the candle-light, and the rush outside, that could be felt, not seen, in the utter darkness—all this threw the young Sonorian off his balance; but only for an instant.

Scarcely had Carlos crossed the threshold before Joaquin followed him, revolver in hand. Still, swift as had been their movements, that of the enemy had been even more rapid.

Both caught a glimpse of a dark form swiftly fleeing down the gloomy street, and Joaquin flung out his pistol hand, but ere he could cover the strangely-shaped form it had been swallowed up by the darkness.

With a grating curse, Carlos dashed forward after the fading form, and lowering his weapon, Joaquin followed swiftly, clutching the arm of his brother just as he was on the point of plunging into the dark alley where the misshapen form had vanished from their view.

"Hold, brother!" warningly uttered Joaquin, forcibly restraining his elder. "Would you blindly rush headlong into the very trap you showed the *ladrones* how to set?"

With a display of strength that would not be denied, Carlos wrested himself free from the grasp of the young Sonorian, but instead of resuming his impetuous rush, he paused short, uttering a hard, brief laugh, as he peered into the gloom that shrouded the narrow passageway.

"You are right, lad. My wits are all of a jumble to-night. Liquor, gold-mining and blood-letting combined have turned my brain all topsy turvy. What do you advise?"

"Two men can do more and better work while acting on the defensive, especially where we have two women to care for, and are pitted against the saints only know how many enemies," uttered the young Sonorian.

"True; let us go back. Take you one side of the street, and I will look to the other. Be ready for hot work, and let not a shadow escape you. There is more afoot to-night than I realized at first," gravely uttered Carlos.

Slowly and cautiously the brothers retraced their steps, closely investigating every spot where an enemy could possibly lie in concealment, but meeting near the house without having discovered aught to confirm their suspicions.

"It was only some luckless rascal whose curiosity got the better of his prudence," said Joaquin with an air of relief.

A short, hard laugh from Carlos greeted this conclusion.

"Better for us if your guess be correct, but I fear there is a deeper meaning at the bottom than idle curiosity. Those two rascals—"

"Two? I saw only one!" exclaimed Joaquin.

"Nevertheless, one pair of legs carried two bodies," positively retorted his elder brother. "It is seldom that I need to cast steel twice at the same mark. My knife went home—I am sure of that. That yell came from the lips of a death-stricken man, and the fellow you saw was carrying the body away on his back."

As he spoke Carlos struck a match and held it close to the ground beneath the window, then looked up into the face of his brother with a low laugh of triumph.

Amid the fragments of broken glass drops of fresh blood were plainly visible.

"That red sign tells the tale plainly enough, brother! And if more proof be needed, where is my dirk? No mortal being with that driven into his skull could have fled as swiftly as that rascal we caught sight of."

"Still that proves no more than I said. Such a dose might well satisfy anybody's curiosity."

"You have not heard all, brother," added Carlos, arising as the match burned itself out. "There is no time to explain now, but I pledge my word that you will see the matter in the same light with me, when you have listened to the story I have to tell. Now, I ask you to trust me implicitly—to follow me without stopping to argue the point, or to ask questions that would consume valuable time."

"Whatever you say, that I will do. Right or wrong, what matter? It is all in a lifetime," tersely said Joaquin.

"Thanks, brother. You shall be satisfied that I am acting all for the best. Watch closely around here until you hear my whistle from the door. If you discover any one lurking near, give the old signal of danger, and I will join you."

True to his pledge, Joaquin made no remarks, but set about performing the duty assigned to him, though he was secretly convinced that Carlos was making a mountain of a molehill. Even if the man or men who had been spying on them through the window were actuated by more than simple curiosity—even if they had noticed the heap of gold lying on the table, or had dogged Carlos from the Wheel of Fortune with designs upon his enormous winnings, the

severe lesson they had received would be amply sufficient to satisfy them that there was naught but hard blows to be earned here.

Carlos rapped at the door and uttered the name of his wife. His voice was recognized, and Carmela immediately gave him admittance.

"My husband—where is Joaquin?" she demanded, uneasily.

"Safe, sister. He is acting as guard, while we prepare for an abrupt flitting," hurriedly replied the gambler, as he caught up a serape and twisted it into a receptacle for the mass of gold that lay on the table.

"I do not understand—"

"Pardon, sister, if I am abrupt. Joaquin has promised to yield to my guidance now, reserving all questions until we are in safer quarters than these. You can trust him, if not me. We must flee from here without the loss of a moment. If you have aught that you cannot afford to abandon, prepare it at once. Nicholasa will aid you."

"My husband's will is my law," was the simple response.

By the time Carlos had secured his gold, binding the weighty bundle upon his shoulders in such a manner as to leave his arms at liberty, Carmela was in readiness.

Murieta opened the door and whistled softly. Almost instantly, Joaquin joined them.

"Is the coast clear?" asked the elder brother.

"Not a soul is stirring save ourselves, that I could see, and my eyes are good ones," a little shortly replied Joaquin.

Carlos noticed the trace of pique in the voice of his brother, and paused to add:

"Remember my pledge. You will say that I am acting wisely when we have reached a place where I can tell you the whole story. Until then, try to believe that I am acting all for the best. Since I must lead the way, will you see that we are not dogged?"

Without a word Joaquin fell back a few paces, but it was clear that his heart was not wholly in the work. It was the first time in his life that he found himself forced to play a secondary part without in the least knowing what were the stakes, and his proud spirit was nettled. Only for that, perhaps the whole course of his life might have been changed, for the better. But the hand of fate was in it—the dark doom must be fulfilled!

Carlos Murieta led the way at a rapid pace, and from the many turns, and the tortuous course he pursued, it was clear that he was not taking the most direct route to the refuge had in view. At length he paused before the door of a long, low building of rough boards, and knocked with his knuckles after a peculiar fashion.

After a delay of several minutes, the door was cautiously opened a few inches, and a deep unpleasant voice asked:

"Is that you, Senor Murieta?"

"Yes, Stefano; it is I, with friends. Open quickly!"

Satisfied that all was correct, the suspicious host cast loose the stout chain and opened the door for the party to enter.

"Arroyal, I believe I can trust you," Carlos paused to say, when fairly inside. "Remember, I am no longer Carlos Murieta, but Don Cristobal Teredo. Admit no one—converse with no one who asks for me by any other name. You understand?"

Stefano Arroyal, a heavy-set, low-browed fellow in whose veins there clearly flowed more Indian than Spanish blood, bowed low, but made no other response. Carlos seemed satisfied, however, and led the way along the dark passage that led toward the rear of the building.

A peculiar wheezing, snuffling sound from the gloom immediately before them, startled Carmela, and as she shrunk back with a low exclamation of alarm, Carlos flung open a door, revealing a small room from whence issued the light of an oil lamp.

"See!" and with a low laugh he stooped to pat the grizzled head of an enormous hound. "There is no cause of alarm, sister. Whatever he might have been in his youth, the dog is harmless now. Blind, toothless, he is in his second childhood. It would be an act of mercy to give him a bullet, but Stefano would sooner slay his mother, were she still living."

Joaquin entered and glanced around him with a low laugh.

"Come, these quarters are almost as princely as those we have just left. Really, brother, for a man bowed down with wealth as you are, you have extremely simple tastes!"

"We are safe here, and that is worth all the rest," was the grave reply. "No one can enter without the consent of old Arroyal, and I can trust him implicitly."

Dropping his golden burden upon the low bed, Carlos motioned his companions to be seated, then spoke:

"To make all clear, brother, I must go back to when I first came over here to see about that grant of land made our father for services rendered Governor Don Despierto, long before the conquest of California by the accursed Americans—"

"You speak of my friends," coldly interposed

Joaquin. "As a race, the noblest, bravest, most generous people God ever made!"

Carlos shrugged his shoulders, a sneer curling his lips.

"They have sent most wretched specimens here, then! But never mind. You have your opinion, I have mine; still, we need not quarrel because we do not happen to think alike on all points."

"As you know, our title to the land-grant was and is disputed, by a family known as Salcedo. I sought them out, to see if the matter could not be settled amicably, but met with anything but an agreeable reception. There was a son, called Raymon, who had the most to say, even when his father was alive. Soon after my appearance, the old gentleman died of some mysterious disease—of poison, some said, and it was even hinted that I had administered the dose, the more surely to gain my ends!"

"But it was false—no one could have the heart to injure that noble old man!" brokenly murmured Nicholasa.

"Don Salcedo was her uncle," explained Carlos, reading the curiosity in the eyes of Joaquin and Carmela. "On the death of her father—her mother died in giving her birth—Don Salcedo adopted her as his own child. He was generous and kind on all save one point."

"He thought it all for the best," gently uttered the girl wife. His love blinded him to Raymon's faults, and he meant to make us both happy."

"I am not blaming him, little one," and Carlos pressed his lips to her fair brow. "But I must tell the story just as it happened, to make all clear to our brother and sister."

"When Don Salcedo died, he left a will bequeathing this disputed land and his other property to his son Raymon, *provided* he married Nicholasa. Otherwise his wealth was to be divided equally between her, him and the church. As you may guess, young Salcedo was willing enough to carry out his share of the conditions, but unluckily for his hopes, there was a serious obstacle in that path—myself."

"Brief as had been my stay at the hacienda, I had gained the love of this little girl, giving her my heart in exchange. This, mind you, before the old gentleman died, or I had the faintest suspicion that I was about to marry an heiress."

"No need of that assurance, brother," said Joaquin, gallantly, but still in earnest. "Only that I have been equally fortunate, I could find it in my heart to envy you the rich prize you have won."

"Thanks, brother, not only for the compliment, but because you have shown that at heart you are still Spanish. Could one of your barbarian friends have uttered a speech so neat and graceful?"

"But this is not my story, and there is still much to tell," he added, hastily, as he noticed the brows of his brother contract at this sneering allusion to his loved Americans.

"As I said, we learned to love, and our troth was plighted before the death of Don Salcedo. It was fortunate that such was the case, for even before the body was fairly cold, young Salcedo so foully insulted me that I could no longer remain beneath the same roof with him. I gave him my defiance, and told him where I might be found whenever he could pluck up courage enough to meet me face to face with the weapons of gentlemen of honor."

"But I waited for him in vain. Instead, a trusty messenger brought me in word from this little girl that all was lost unless I came to her rescue right speedily. Be sure I was early at the rendezvous, and then I learned about the will. Already Raymon had urged his suit, and when he had frightened the poor girl into confessing her engagement to me, he uttered foul threats and swore that she should be his, by fair means or foul."

"You faced the scoundrel, and taught him a much-needed lesson, of course!" cried Joaquin.

"Wait and you will see. Such was my first impulse, I admit, but then I thought best to make sure of the precious treasure fortune had granted me. Nicholasa trusted me implicitly, and we at once hastened to the Mission, where a holy father quickly united us, only asking our names. I wondered at this then, but I see the reason now. He had already heard of the proviso in the will, and was eager to secure a little fortune to his church by rendering it impossible for young Salcedo to wed Nicholasa. So long as I lived that could never come about, and as soon as the ceremony was ended he drew me aside and told me that Raymon Salcedo had sworn before the church that I was guilty of poisoning his father!"

"Flee at once, and far from here," he said. "If captured, your death is assured."

"I knew that what he said was true. Among his servants Raymon Salcedo could have found a dozen to swear that they saw me administer the poison, if necessary. So I fled, more for the sake of this poor child than aught else. I came here, sent that letter to you, then busied myself in searching for the whereabouts of the witnesses who could prove our right to that land-grant."

"I have heard of one—Flores—who is now at or near Hangtown. We must hunt him up and see what he can do for us. But of that, more after a bit."

"Yesterday I learned that Raymon Salcedo was in town, no doubt hunting for me. When once we have settled about the land claim, then I will hunt him out. Until then, I do not care to meet."

"You remember that, just before throwing my knife, I bent low over the table. I had a reason for so doing. Something—instinct, may be—warned me that we were being spied upon, and I bent over to peer under my arm to see if any one was at the window, without alarming them. You know what followed. I saw a human face, and I feel sure that it was the face of Raymon Salcedo!"

"Now you know why I was so sure that it was no idle curiosity that led to the espial—"

Carlos abruptly ceased speaking, startled by the strange behavior of Carmela Murieta. For some little time she had been abstracted in manner, frequently glancing toward the closed door. Now she arose and silently glided across the room, listening at the key-hole, only to swiftly return and whisper:

"We are spied upon! Some one is listening at the door! I heard them breathing distinctly!"

CHAPTER IV.

A COOL CUSTOMER.

"TEN thousand devils fly away with the sluggish rascal! Why does he not return and report his success? He has had time enough to drain the hearts of a dozen men!"

John Vanderslice drained his glass and thumped it down on the table with such force that the fragile ware flew into a score of pieces. An angry snarl greeted the red blood that trickled from a slight gash on one finger, and the gambler mingled curses with his snarls as he savagely twisted a handkerchief around the injured member.

John Vanderslice presented anything but an agreeable picture then as he sat in his richly-furnished den, awaiting the return of Pepe the Creeper. He was alone, and there was no longer any necessity for wearing his usual disguise of bland smile and affable tones. The wolf in his nature was allowed to show itself freely now, and the face that so many deemed frank and handsome was repulsive and almost hideous—the countenance of one deep-stained with crime—of one half-drunk, whose craven fears are battling with hatred and a lust for bitter revenge.

"He should have been here an hour ago," he muttered, emitting his breath through his nostrils so forcibly that it sounded like the snort of a frightened horse. "Can it be that Satan still favors that infernal fiend? More than once I have been tempted to believe what I have heard others say—that Joaquin Murieta had bartered his soul to the foul fiend—and now, if he has foiled the leap of Pepe the Creeper, I will be ready to believe it!"

"Bah!" the gambler added with a sudden change of tone as he tossed back his long locks with an air of half-drunken defiance, then pouring out another glass of brandy. "I am a fool! Rat Pepe is not one of the sort that fails. Joaquin Murieta has crossed my path for the last time—ere this he is cold in the grasp of death. There was only one blow—a swift, sure and silent thrust, such as Pepe the Creeper knows so well how to deliver. That was it, I heard no noise—no outcry—and Joaquin Murieta would fight hard as long as a breath of life remained in his carcass."

"So—I can see it now! The Creeper stole after him until the right spot was reached—dark and lonely. A blow—ha! down to the lowest pit of Satan's dominions ye go, mocking devil! Down—down—ha! ha!"

The half-drunken, half-crazed gambler started at the unearthly sounds of his own laughter. He stared around him with a wild glare in his bloodshot eyes, one hand convulsively grasping the silver hilt of a poniard; but then, by a mighty effort the banished the mad frenzy that a grinning devil was dancing around the room in mockery.

"Joaquin Murieta is dead," he repeated, as though trying to convince himself of the ardently wished for fact. "I forgot that no one but us two was to know of my part in it. The gold must be divided, and Pepe must give his comrades the slip, before he can come here. I can afford to wait, when such glorious tidings is on the road—Ha!"

John Vanderslice leaped to his feet as a peculiar rap echoed dully through the narrow door—for it was the signal agreed upon before Pepe the Creeper departed on his mission of death. With hands that trembled like those of a man with the ague, so great was his eagerness to learn the result of his foul plot, John Vanderslice removed bolts and bars, then flung the door wide open.

"Come in, Creeper—Hell and furies!"

A man entered, but a very different personage from the emissary John Vanderslice expected. With an angry curse the gambler attempted to bar the way, but the cold muzzle of

a revolver was thrust into his face, and a low, but stern voice uttered:

"Keep your tongue between your teeth, and make way, John Vanderslice. I am not anxious to kill you—just at present, but if you are obstinate, I'll scatter your brains over the floor with as little compunction as though you were a mad-dog seeking to bury your fangs in my throat."

John Vanderslice, it was clear, was not brave to foolhardiness, for he cowered before that stern front and backed away from the door. The intruder entered, and still holding the gambler covered by his weapon, closed and secured the door.

Then a sudden and complete change came over him. He replaced his pistol and sinking into a chair, coolly poured out a glass of brandy, at the same time nodding to a seat opposite.

"Be seated, senor," he said, in Spanish, his voice calm, and by no means unpleasant. "I have so much to say to you that it will be wearisome work standing."

John Vanderslice quickly rallied, as soon as that ugly weapon was removed from contact with his person, and wholly sobered by the great shock he had received, keenly scrutinized the audacious stranger. Neither face nor form was familiar. To the best of his knowledge, he and this cool customer had never met each other before.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded, his eyes beginning to glow with anger, and one hand stealing toward a weapon.

As if by magic a cocked revolver appeared in the hand of the stranger, resting upon the table, its silver sight bearing full upon the gambler's heart.

"Too old a bird to be trapped by so clumsy a fowler, my friend," he laughed, then adding in a sterner tone that sounded more like a command than a request: "Pray be seated, my dear sir, and join me in a glass of brandy. Surely you will not oblige me to insist?"

John Vanderslice felt that he had met his master, and was glad to drop into the chair in order to hide his visible quaking. He could not remove his eyes from the bold, handsome face of this strange visitor, who seemed to exert an influence over him something akin to the peculiar fascination attributed to the rattlesnake.

The stranger was young, seemingly not more than five-and-twenty years of age at the outside, but there was something in the expression of his face that told he had crowded a great deal of life into that brief space. He was handsome beyond the generality of men. His features were almost classically regular, yet with nothing of softness or effeminacy in them. His hair was jetty black, worn long upon his shoulders. His eyes large and brilliant. His skin a rich healthful brown. A jetty mustache shaded, but did not conceal a well formed mouth, red lips and white, even teeth. His dress was rich and of brilliant coloring, the costume of a native Californian, thickly studded with precious metal in the shape of buttons, tiny bells and heavy lace.

"You are a good judge of fine liquor and tobacco, senor," said this cool customer, emptying his glass and biting the end off a cigar. "But to business. A moment since, you asked me a question—couched in very discourteous terms, but we will let that pass. Who am I? Blunt and to the point. My answer shall be no less so. I am a friend and ally, or else your bitter enemy, just as you may elect, *Senor Don Manuel Camplido!*"

John Vanderslice leaped to his feet with a grating curse, his face, or as much of it as was not hidden from view by his heavy beard, turning a sickly white as this title and name were slowly, distinctly enunciated by the stranger. But swiftly that ominous tube of death was raised and stared him full in the face. Behind it gleamed those brilliant eyes, menacing, despite the sneering smile that curved the red lips.

"You are easily excited to night, Don Manuel—"

With a forced laugh, the gambler resumed his seat, cutting short the drawling speech of his visitor.

"You have made a strange mistake. My name is not Don Manuel anything, nor have I ever heard of such a person before this. I am John Vanderslice, a native of New Orleans, with not a drop of Spanish, Mexican or California blood in my veins."

The audacious stranger eyed the gambler closely while he was uttering these words, a mocking smile on his lips.

"You tell the story glibly," he observed, as his *ris-a-vis* paused, "but—pardon me—you are lying. Bah!" and his voice rung with mingled contempt and scorn as John Vanderslice started with anger at this blunt insult. "Keep your seat and temper. You cannot frighten me, nor can you kill me, dearly as you would just now like to do so. Before you could draw a weapon, I could and would empty these bullets into your carcass. You understand this quite as well as I; then why so many false moves? Let us play the game out, open and above-board."

"Who are you, and what do you want?" sullenly demanded the gambler, brushing the perspiration from his brow with a hand that would tremble in spite of all his efforts to command his shaken nerves.

"I will answer the first question when we have arrived at a proper understanding. As for the other, I wish first to prove to you that I know you and your past, thoroughly."

"Your name is Don Manuel Camplido, an ex-captain of the lancers in the late war between Mexico and the United States. You displayed such arrant cowardice on the field of battle, that you resigned your commission to save being cashiered. Quiet! I am relating the history of one Don Manuel Camplido. You swear that you are not he; then why show such rage when I point out the failings of a stranger?"

John Vanderslice writhed at the malicious laugh which accompanied these mocking words. He poured out a glass of brandy and swallowed the fiery liquor at a gulp, then sullenly stared at his audacious visitor.

"You—pardon, I should have said Don Manuel—owned a vast estate, and were rich beyond the ordinary run of men when you left the army and retired to your stock farm. You fell in love with the only daughter of a neighbor, Don Carillo Felix, and in due course of time were betrothed to the fair Carmela, by her father, for as yet the child knew nothing of her own heart or what love meant. But she was not long kept in ignorance."

General Santa Anna owned an adjoining estate, and among his retainers was a young fellow named Joaquin Murieta. By a lucky accident he was one day enabled to do the fair Carmela a service—saved her life, if I am informed correctly. By all the laws of romance, he was entitled to her true love as the reward of his gallantry, and he was so blessed. They loved, and you soon discovered the disagreeable fact. You sensibly sought to quietly remove a dangerous rival from your love-path, but were unlucky in choosing your tools, and failed. Then you tried your own hand at the game, only to fail even more signally. You were defeated by the boy, and covered with disgrace."

John Vanderslice ground a fierce curse between his teeth, as he snarled:

"Again I swear that you lie when you couple me with this Don-the-devil! I am an American, born and bred!"

"Stop!" and there was deadly danger in both voice and face of the stranger. "Twice you have given me the lie direct. I can forgive much to a man who finds himself driven to a corner from whence he sees no method to escape, but I swear to you that the next time you dare to utter such words, I will kill you before the breath that sounded them has time to cool on your lips! I know you. I know you are Don Manuel Camplido, and have no more right to the name you now bear than I have. I know that I have only to step on the street and denounce you to any of our countrymen, to have them arrest you and bear you back to answer for the death of Don Carillo Felix—unless their rage should overpower their love of justice, and lead them to tear you limb from limb in their fury!"

The gambler was completely cowed by this swiftly uttered speech, so quiet, yet so full of a deadly determination that there could be no doubting but that the stern threat would be promptly executed.

The stranger eyed him keenly for a few moments, then, as if satisfied that he was fully comprehended, he resumed his reading from a dark page of a still darker past, in the same low, smooth, placid tones:

"I don't think your memory is so poor that I need recall the story, step by step, so I will only say enough to prove that I am perfectly familiar with your past history."

"You made known this love secret to the father, and he soon afterward surprised the lovers together. Hot words and even blows passed, then the proud Don resolved to take his wayward daughter to his sister's, where she could be more closely guarded. You laid a cunning trap for gaining your ends. Don Felix refused to force his daughter to wed you, and she scornfully refused to keep the pledge made for her. You disguised a portion of your servants as Indians, and ambushed the party, capturing the girl, shooting and scalping her father, laying your plans so cunningly that suspicion must fall upon Joaquin Murieta."

"But why continue? Enough that in the end you were foiled at every point. Your crimes were discovered. You were captured by Joaquin Murieta, who was wedded to Carmela by the death-bed of her father, who died while giving them his blessing."

"You managed to escape, and fled the country. You came here, as John Vanderslice, of New Orleans, and opening this gambling hell, have waxed enormously rich. But you never forgot or forgave the boy who had defeated and covered you with disgrace, and to-night, when you believed you saw Joaquin Murieta enter your den, you resolved that he should never live to see another day dawn. But right there you made a double mistake. First, the man

you believed you recognized, was not Joaquin Murieta—"

A gasping cry parted the gambler's lips. His face became more livid, his bloodshot eyes seemed starting from their sockets. He strove to speak, but the power of articulation was denied him. He could only stare at the stranger.

"I know what I say, and will prove the truth of my assertion. I do not wonder at your mistake, for I have seen the two men together, and the close resemblance is really marvelous. Even I could scarcely tell them apart, though Joaquin is several years younger than his brother Carlos."

"It was Carlos Murieta whom you set your men to follow and kill. I, too, played the fool. But let that pass for the present."

"Once more I ask you, who are you, that knows or pretends to know so much about me and my affairs?" the gambler at length managed to articulate, as his strange visitor paused to light a fresh cigar.

"As I answered when you first asked the question: a friend and ally, or a bitter enemy, just as you may elect," was the cool response.

"I am not ready to answer more definitely just at present. Now that I have delivered my credentials, and said enough to satisfy you that I am well behind the scenes, I am ready to deliver my report."

"Your report!" echoed John Vanderslice.

"As deputy to your men who set out on the track of Carlos Murieta, believing him to be his brother Joaquin."

"Go on; what do you know—what happened?"

"Not. What you expected and desired. Pepe the Creeper for once met his match in cunning and skill. Instead of killing, he was killed—"

A curse that was almost a groan burst from the lips of the gambler, but then, by a mighty effort he recovered a portion of his wonted composure. A sickly smile accompanied the words:

"After all, what matters, since you say that I was mistaken in the man." Yet I could have sworn the fellow was Joaquin Murieta!"

"No matter—only the death of the men you sent out to kill. You do not seem greatly affected by the loss of your tool, Pepe the Creeper. Yet he was truer to you than to himself. He would have laid down his life in your defense at any moment. You treated him like a dog; he loved you as little lower than the saints. He abandoned friends, family—all, to follow you when you fled from a shameful death!"

The gambler uttered a hard, sneering laugh. Gratitude had no place in his composition.

"Pepe failed where he should have succeeded. He must have blundered fearfully. If he did, and hence was killed instead of killing, he richly deserved his fate."

"Bah! you are even worse than I credited you with being!" muttered the stranger, in tones of utter disgust.

"I am what I am," impatiently cried John Vanderslice, his courage beginning to return to him. "Tell me what you came to tell, and have done with it, in the devil's name!"

"A fitting patron saint for our work, Don Manuel Camplido!"

CHAPTER V.

A BRACE OF VILLAINS.

"GET down to business!" growled John Vanderslice, betraying far more assurance than before, being satisfied that his strange visitor was a rascal like himself. "You have wasted time and words enough. Come to the point."

"There is no particular hurry, Don Manuel," coolly retorted the stranger, draining the decanter into his glass and sipping the aromatic liquor with the air of a connoisseur. "The work that remains to be done I have intrusted to surer hands than either yours or mine."

"You have not mixed my name up with the affair?" demanded John Vanderslice, his heavy brow corrugating.

"Bah! do you fear for your reputation?" sneered the stranger. "But rest at ease. Even if this night's work reveals you in your true colors to one man more, the world at large will never be any the wiser for his knowledge. Unless I bid him speak, the grave could not keep the secret more sacredly."

Still the gambler was far from being satisfied, and his gloomy countenance showed as much. This man was taking a strange degree of interest in his personal affairs, was carrying matters with a high hand, and who could say how deeply he might be involving him, John Vanderslice, in meshes from which escape might be difficult if not utterly impossible? Why should he permit this? Why not, by one bold, swift stroke, cut the toils that seemed tightening about him?

A low, mocking laugh parted the lips of the stranger. He seemed gifted with a supernatural power, for when he spoke it was to answer the thoughts of John Vanderslice, as though they had been expressed in plain speech.

"Cast all such ideas aside forever, senior. Any blow at me, even if successful, will swiftly recoil upon your own head. I have given a

rendezvous here to a man who would not hesitate to stab his own parents if I but expressed the wish. If aught should befall me, you would be called to a speedy and terrible account. Bear that in mind."

"You have threatened enough," John Vanderslice growled. "If you have nothing more important to say—good-night!"

"In good time we will part, but not just yet," laughed the stranger. "I said, a few minutes back, that I, as well as you, had played the fool this evening. Let me explain."

"For some little time I have been hunting for this man—Carlos Murieta, the one you mistook for his brother, Joaquin—and this evening I discovered him, when least expecting it."

"It was at your monte table. He was playing high, and there was such a crowd gathered around him that I knew it would be folly for me to pick a quarrel with him there. Instead, I resolved to wait until he quit the game and left the house. Then I would follow and call him to account."

"It was while waiting that I first suspected you and your purpose. Not that I recognized Don Manuel Camplido, whose peculiar history a friend had given me, but I believed that you meditated an attempt to recover the gold Carlos Murieta was winning. For that reason I watched you. I saw you signal Pepe the Creeper, and come here. Then I was sure, and well contented to have a dangerous and unpleasant job taken off my hands, I contented myself with watching the interesting drama."

"The Creeper was a little careless, for I managed to overhear him in conversation with the three men whom he chose as his comrades in the venture. Thus assured that the fate of my enemy was sealed, I returned to the hall, where Carlos was making his final bet."

"You know how he escaped the crowd. I was carried along by the rushing pack, in their mad scramble for the gold he cast away, and when I contrived to clear myself, and leave the building, I had barely time to catch a glimpse of Pepe as he and his fellows were starting after their quarry."

"Like you, I never dreamed that failure was possible with four such men on the trail, and hence I did not press them closely, contenting myself with barely keeping them in view. Because of this, I cannot say how it happened, but all at once there came the clash of steel from the darkness ahead, and I knew that Carlos Murieta had turned to bay and was fighting desperately for his life."

"I pressed forward to make sure that the work was thoroughly accomplished, but I was just a second too late. A man came to the rescue, and with three pistol shots the affair was ended—for Carlos Murieta had split the thick skull of one of his assailants in halves."

"That man was Joaquin Murieta!"

A grating curse broke from the lips of the gambler king.

"And you let him—suffered them both to escape? Ten thousand curses on—"

"Cool and easy, Senior Don Manuel Camplido," interposed the stranger with an emphasis on the name that resulted much as might a sudden ice-water *douche* administered to a choleric patient. "Who am I to handle two men, the least of whom made a plaything of you? I hate Carlos Murieta as bitterly as you hate his brother, and I am just conceited enough to think myself the equal of any one man of my inches that treads the footstool—but I am not a fool. I saw those two men dispose of four stout, practiced bravos before any one of them could deal a second blow. You would have fled in mad terror—I determined to shadow them to their den, and then crush them forever!"

"And you did? You know where they are hiding?" eagerly questioned John Vanderslice, ignoring the bluntly expressed contempt of the Californian; but the latter evidently preferred making his report after his own fashion.

"The task was easier and less dangerous than I thought for, since I had only to follow after the Creeper—"

"You said he was dead—killed by those devils!"

"I did—and he was; but not at that time. He felt the wind of Joaquin Murieta's first bullet across his temple, and believing that he had made sure of Carlos—for he felt the hilt of his knife check against the fellow's ribs—he did not wait to be sent down by another and better aimed bullet, but fell in a heap like a dead man. The firing attracted attention, and the brothers had no spare time to inspect their game, fleeing at once."

"Pepe the Creeper dogged them, and I followed him at a safe distance, until our two friends were run to earth. I was quite content to keep in the background, when I saw how thoroughly Pepe was playing my game. Let him run the risk, and I would gain the knowledge at second-hand from you."

"It was clearly the Creeper's off night, for he had not been spying long at the lighted window before there came a crash of glass, and Pepe fell back, uttering a frightful screech, a dagger buried half its length in his skull!"

"I think I deserve no little credit for what followed. I was ignorant whether the fellow

was dead or alive, but I rushed forward, slung his carcass over my shoulder and fled with him at top speed. I was followed by the brothers, but not far. I turned down the first dark alley, and, looking back, saw one check the other, as if fearing to fall into the same trap they had set for your men an hour before.

"I only paused long enough to note this, then made for the den of a trusty if humble friend, whom I most fortunately found at home. He asked no questions as he admitted me, and I gave him no explanations, simply bidding him go and learn all he could regarding the brothers Murieta, then return and report result.

"As he left, I turned to Pepe the Creeper. By the dim light I could see that the weapon—the same dirk that Carlos Murieta made such a significant display of at your monte table—had entered his right eye, and must be deep buried in his brain. Of course the injury was mortal—indeed, the marvel is that Pepe ever drew breath after the wound was inflicted—and yet the mate to the destroyed eye was watching me closely, and gleaming like a coal of fire!

"A still greater surprise awaited me. Pepe retained full possession of his senses, and though his tongue moved a little stiffly, he could talk freely and intelligently.

"I saw that nothing could be done for him, that the best of surgical skill would be worse than thrown away in attempting to remove the steel from its living sheath. Besides, the delirium of death might at any moment creep over him, and it not only was important for me to learn all that he had discovered through that window, but he might utter dangerous words in case a stranger was brought in.

"I fear I stretched the truth a little, while satisfying his scruples, but the end amply justifies the means. He might die before I could find and prevail upon you to accompany me to his death-bed, and I thought it a shame that you should wholly lose the reward of your bold plotting."

"Spare your sneers," growled John Vanderslice. "Cut it as short as you can, and come to the point. Of course it will end in a demand for hush money. Name your sum—though I can defy you, if I choose, since your only witness is dead."

"You think so?" and the Californian smiled sweetly.

Lighting a fresh cigar, he resumed: "I have a smooth and plausible tongue, when necessary, and it was not a very difficult task for me to convince Pepe the Creeper that I was your intimate friend and ally, whom you had sent to see that he did not fail in his duty. As I said so, I saw his one remaining eye grow dim. Possibly the poor devil felt hurt to think that you could mistrust his fidelity—who knows?"

"It was a lucky stroke, though, for he at once unboomed himself. He had discovered your mistake, when he saw the two brothers Murieta in the lighted room together, and he knew that it was Carlos, not Joaquin, whom he had attempted to kill. More than that, there were two women in the room, wives of the two brothers. One he did not know, though I at once recognized her from his description. The other—he heard Joaquin introduce her as his wife."

"Carmela Felix!" uttered John Vanderslice, with a grating curse, as his swarthy face grew red and wrathful.

"That was—Carmela Murieta that is—and ten times more blooming and lovely than of old, Pepe said," craftily added the Californian, keenly, though covertly watching the effect of his words on the gambler.

He was more than satisfied. The old passion was not lessened by the months that had passed, but burned more fiercely than ever in the veins of John Vanderslice, as Don Manuel Camplido at present chose to be called. This love—if love the beastlike passion could be termed—for the wife, and hatred for the husband, would lead the gambler into any extremities, however black and sinful.

"But Pepe the Creeper was rapidly traveling the trail that ends in death," continued the Californian, "and I made the most of the moments that were left him. He was convinced that I was all I pretended, and as his perceptions grew less keen, he did not wonder or doubt when I drew from him the knowledge of the place where you were to await him, and the signal which he was to give on returning. Then, as he was dying, he returned in fancy to the past days when you both were in Mexico. It was then that I learned your real name—your history was familiar to me before."

"Well, the fellow died, with your name on his lips. I believe it was coupled with a prayer. It may be that he was interceding for you—"

"Drop that!" growled the gambler, his voice husky and harsh.

The Californian stared at him in well-counterfeited amaze.

"So! you can feel—I had doubted it; but never mind. Pepe the Creeper has gone to his everlasting account, and of one thing you may be sure: if spirits are permitted to say aught concerning those whom they knew in the flesh, Pepe will give an account of you that would

hardly be recognized by your most intimate friends on earth."

John Vanderslice writhed beneath this biting jeer, but dared not give open expression to the hot rage that inwardly consumed him. He knew not what to make of this man. If a friend, he was a most disagreeable one; if an enemy, he was one to be dreaded. That he was keen and quick-witted was proved by the apparent ease with which he read the thoughts of his companion.

"It is a habit, foolish, perhaps, with me to turn my roughest side to a new acquaintance. You are cursing me beneath your breath, and to strike me dead at your feet, at this moment, would furnish you food for pleasant thoughts and smiles for a month to come. Notwithstanding this, I pledge you my word of honor as a Spanish gentleman that when we part to-night it will be as good comrades and the best of friends," the Californian said, with more of outward earnestness than he had until now displayed.

"It may be, but you take infernally awkward methods to create a feeling of friendship," suddenly muttered the gambler.

"Because you could not be convinced by milder means," the other laughed. "I have shown you what I can do, if the disagreeable necessity ever arises. Pat the right way of the fur, and I am the mildest of sheep."

"Well, when Pepe the Creeper died, I drew the dirk from his brain, cleaned it, put it in my bosom, swearing over the corpse that I would keep the steel warm until I could find for it a sheath in the heart of Carlos Murieta."

"I bethought myself that you would be growing uneasy at the long delay of your emissaries, and so resolved to come and deliver the report of Pepe the Creeper. Before setting out, I left a note for my friend, directing him to follow—"

"Giving him rendezvous here?" interrupted John Vanderslice.

"Certainly—where else? You need not fear, my dear friend. We will need more than one trusty tool before we are done with these cursed brothers, and a more faithful henchman than Dirty Dick never drew the breath of life."

"Not the drunken, half-crazy rascal they call Dirty Dick?" demanded John Vanderslice, in a tone of angry disgust.

"The very same. But, my dear friend, do not use such terms where Richard can overhear them, I warn you for your own sake. It would be decidedly unhealthy."

John Vanderslice made no response. He poured out a glass from a fresh bottle of brandy and gulped the liquor down with an air of savage vexation that greatly amused the Californian.

"I stand ready to wager any reasonable sum of money that before this month is out you will voluntarily pronounce Dirty Dick a jewel of the very first water. I have proved his worth on numberless occasions, and never yet have I known him to fail me. Had he only been with me when Carlos Murieta first crossed my path! However, in that case, I would probably never have had the exquisite pleasure of making your acquaintance, so there is no loss without some gain!"

"A truce to these left-handed compliments," sourly uttered the gambler king. "Tell me who you are, and what you expect of me. Come to the point, if you possibly can."

"I am a man who hates Carlos Murieta as bitterly as you hate his brother Joaquin," was the stern response, spoken swiftly and with a fire that told how earnest was the Californian in what he said. "A man who loves Carlos Murieta's wife as madly as you love Joaquin's Carmela. Just as Joaquin stole away your bride, so Carlos robbed me of mine. I have sworn to kill him, and make her my own. I believe that you have taken a similar oath."

John Vanderslice reached his hand across the table, and it was warmly clasped by the Californian.

"Good!" the latter cried, with savage glee. "Those brothers are incarnate demons. The devil seems to fight for them. Alone, it would be folly for either of us to attack them—but united as we will be, by a similar hatred and longing for revenge, let them beware!"

"I too say good!" cried John Vanderslice, his ill-humor vanishing like magic. "But is it not time for us to meet on more equal terms? You know my names—both real and assumed—while I am still ignorant of yours?"

"There is no longer any reason for secrecy," laughed the Californian, "though the name will not greatly enlighten you. I am Raymon Salcedo, a native of this State."

"Now we can talk more easily," and John Vanderslice refilled their glasses. "Of course you have a story to tell—"

At that moment there came a peculiar rap at the door.

"It is my spy," uttered Salcedo, arising to remove the fastenings. "Now for his report."

CHAPTER VI.

DIRTY DICK REPORTS.

THE instant the door was opened wide enough to permit the passage of his body, a lean, wiry-

looking man slipped through the opening, and brushing past Raymon Salcedo, dropped into the chair recently vacated by the Californian. As if unconsciously one grimy paw closed upon the glass of brandy just poured out by John Vanderslice, raised it to a cavernous-looking mouth, and then the foxy eyes swam in a moisture of ecstatic delight as the oily liquid gurgled down his seasoned throat.

"Hoof—woof!" and he smacked his leathery-looking lips with a series of pistol-like explosions. "Set her up ag'in, boss! Horn toads an' t'rantler juice ain't nowhar! Angel's tears comes nearer the bull's-eye. Double distilled honey-dew, stirred up with a hornet's tail! Fill her up to runnin' over, boss. 'Tain't ofen a low-down critter like me gits the chauce fer to hobble-de-bob 'long with a starchy, tip-top cuss like you—"

"Business, Richard!" uttered the Californian, in a sharp, quick tone that operated like magic.

Dirty Dick swiftly arose from the seat he had usurped and glided into a position where he could face both Raymon Salcedo and John Vanderslice. He stood like a statue, erect and motionless, only the keen glittering of his small, fox-like eyes betraying any signs of life.

With an approving nod, the Californian took the vacated chair, refilled his glass and said to the gambler:

"Question him, my dear friend. I warrant he is full of information as an egg is full of meat."

"You found those people—two men and their wives? You know where they are hiding? You can lead a force of men there at any moment?" hurriedly asked John Vanderslice.

He paused for an answer, but none came. Dirty Dick stood motionless like one frozen to stone. The Californian smiled softly as he placidly sipped his liquor.

"Curse you, fellow, why don't you answer?" snarled Vanderslice, his face flushing hotly.

Still not a muscle or feature moved.

A peculiar character was Dirty Dick Sleeper, and as he was fated to play a prominent part in the tragedy of Joaquin Murieta's life, a brief description of his personal appearance will not be out of place in this connection.

He was tall, bony and thin almost to emaciation. His hair and beard, both kept close cropped, were of a peculiar foxy color, giving no indication of his actual age, which might be anywhere between twenty-five and sixty years. His skin was much darker than his hair, rivaling in hue that of an Indian, but whether this was natural, or the result of long accumulating layers of dirt and smoke, would have puzzled his most intimate acquaintance to decide. His dress was composed of buckskin throughout, which had shrunk from wetting until it fitted his bony angles like a second skin, and was a marvel of dirt and grease.

Never was a nickname more appropriate than that of Dirty Dick. He who bore it, actually seemed proud of the sobriquet. In his facetious moments he often declared that whenever he encountered pure water, an introduction was necessary before he could recognize it, and certainly his appearance justified the statement.

Yet in one respect he practiced the art of cleanliness. The weapons he bore were of the finest workmanship and kept in the best of order. Not a speck of rust or stain was permitted to ever settle upon knife or revolvers.

A complete history of his life would be well worth reading, and of peculiar interest to many old Californians who will not be likely to forget Dirty Dick Sleeper while the breath of life remains theirs, but only the briefest outline can be allowed space in this record of wild life.

Almost from infancy a wanderer, from early youth a trapper and Indian-fighter, in manhood a guide, scout and explorer, then a gold-hunter, now an unhired *attache* to young Raymon Salcedo, an allegiance transferred from Don Pedrillo Salcedo, intensified by a love that was little short of idolatry. It was a pity that such a marvel of fidelity and devotion had not chosen a more honorable patron. As it was, Dirty Dick became one of the most noted and successful rascals on the Pacific slope, the greater part of which reputation he owed to his single-hearted devotion to Raymon Salcedo.

John Vanderslice turned from the deaf and dumb statue to the Californian, who laughed softly as he said:

"Friend Richard takes orders from no one but me, senior. He sees that we are friendly, smoking and drinking together; yet if I were to say—kill me this gentleman, old Dick—your life would not be worth one moment's purchase. I tell you this to prove that I was not boasting when I said that I command a surer *aide* than Pepe the Creeper. I will give you another proof, Richard!"

Instantly the statue became flesh and blood, the iron-like rigidity disappeared and the thin, leathery lips parted.

"Here, boss, ready fer work or play, jist as you please."

"This gentleman is my particular friend and ally. Until you receive orders to the contrary, directly from my lips, his request or command

must be obeyed as unhesitatingly as though it came from me. You understand?"

Dirty Dick nodded, but whether he was pleased or the contrary, could not be told from aught that appeared in his Sphinx-like countenance. But Raymon Salcedo seemed satisfied, and turned again to John Vanderslice.

"You will never have cause to regret the loss of Pepe the Creeper, senior, as long as we remain good friends. I lend you the services of a man worth a dozen such as the Rat was. You have only to express a wish, and Richard will see that it is fulfilled."

The gambler was one who knew how to profit by a lesson read him, and without speaking, poured out a glass of brandy and pushed it toward Dirty Dick. The ice was fairly broken, and the spy was ready to report.

"Tell the story after your own fashion, Dick," said Raymon, experience telling him that thus they would arrive at the bottom facts more quickly than by questioning.

"I've see'd harder jobs, an' then ag'in I've struck a heap softer snaps than this 'un," began Dirty Dick, disdaining the use of a chair, and squatting upon his heels, Indian fashion. "Fer greasers, them two critters wasn't no slouches."

The brows of John Vanderslice contracted, but Raymon Salcedo laughed softly as he said:

"Richard is a true American in his likes and dislikes, senior. But he knows that I am a Californian, you a native of New Orleans. Go on, Richard!"

Dirty Dick seemed a little puzzled to account for this interruption. It was no more than truth what Salcedo said. To him, the young man was as wholly American as himself, and he never suspected that the gambler king was other than what he professed to be.

"I struck the trail as you told me, boss, an' follered it clean to the eend. 'Twas more like fun than anythin' I've struck sence I quit Injun-huntin'. 'Peared like the two greasers 'spected somethin' o' the kind, fer one on 'em kept scoutin' around ontel the other come out o' the shanty with two wimmin critters, kerryin' bundles the three on 'em. They laid a p'izen long an' crooked trail, but I kept on the right scent, an' run 'em to earth—whar do you think?"

"You are telling the story, Dick. Spare us the trouble of guessing," answered Salcedo, yet beneath his carelessness lay a curiosity no less intense than that which caused the dark eyes of John Vanderslice to glow like living coals.

"You hain't forgot Stefano Arroyal, the greaser, boss?"

"And they sought shelter in his house?" eagerly demanded the Californian, and as Dirty Dick nodded acquiescence, a low cry of devilish exultation burst from his lips.

"The game is our own now! I hold the neck of Stefano Arroyal between my thumb and finger—one word from me, and he dies! He knows this, too. He dare not refuse to perform any duty or task I may set him. Ha! Don Manuel—"

"Hold! You forget yourself!" sternly cried John Vanderslice.

"An' mebbe 'twon't be so easy, after all, boss," quietly interposed Dirty Dick. "Better let me tell the hull story afore ye holler!"

"Go on, curse you!" growled Salcedo, provoked at having temporarily lost the self-control on which he so prided himself.

"Curses don't hurt like kicke or licks," philosophically observed Dirty Dick, though the genial smile faded from his lips. "Mebbe I deserve all three both on 'em, an' then ag'in mebbe I don't. But no matter—I ain't one to complain."

"Lucky fer me I got cluss enough afore the door was opened to 'em to hear the voice an' ketch a glimps' of the old man's face. I knowed then that I was all hunky, an' I made up my mind that I'd larn all thar was to find out afore I tuck the back trail. I didn't want to 'pend on the greaser more'n I could help, so I tuck a little scout 'round the shebang. That didn't take long. I see that thar was no way to either see or hear the game talk unless I could git inside, so I went back an' give the old signal to Arroyal."

"He answered it, but didn't seem like to bu'st wide open with joy when he sot his two eyes onto me. I told him plain what I wanted, but he come out flat-footed that he'd see me durned to thunder an' guns fust. They wasn't no time fer argufyin' the matter, so I jist put the thumb-screws on the cuss an' give 'em a extra turn, so to speak. Course he knocked under—bound to do that, you know, boss."

"Yes; go on," shortly responded Raymon Salcedo.

"You know the argyment I used, so 'tain't no use to tell it all over. 'Nough that the p'izen cuss let me in an' showed me whar the light shone through the keyhole in the door o' the room they was cached in, but that didn't suit me. I wasn't takin' no blind chances jist then—not that I'm so p'izen keeful o' my old hide, but you said to bring back a full report an' I wasn't goin' to fail you now fer the fust time, ef playin' my keerds fer all they was worth would hender me from makin' a slip-up."

"The old greaser wasn't none too good fer to play me a dirty trick ef so be he thought it

could be done without too great a resk to his own thrapple, so I made him strike a light an' tuck a good look at the lay o' the ground. Lucky that I did, too."

"Layin' cluss to the door was that old houn' dog of the greaser's. He's past bitin', but ef I'd crep' up in the dark an' stumbled over him, the cussed critter mought 'a' made noise enough to fetch both them fellers onto my back, with old Stefano to slip in a lick from ahind. As it was, the pup knowed me, an' made no fuss. Then in the corner stood a bun'le o' dry hides an' blankets—another lucky diskivery, as you shall see."

"When I marked out the lay o' the ground, I g'ive Stefano a polite hint to go to the devil, an' when he tuck hisself off, I crawled up to the door an' tuck a peep through the keyhole."

"Course I couldn't see much, but it was enough to show that all four o' our birds was in the one room. They was talkin' busy, an' so I put my ear whar my eye hed tuck its turn. I could make out nearly every word, but what they was talkin' 'bout wasn't nothin' new to either you or me, bein' the story of what tuck place up kentry—"

"Skip that portion," interposed Salcedo, as Dirty Dick hesitated with a side glance toward the eagerly listening gambler. "Not that I have any secrets from our friend, here—he knows already that Carlos Murieta stole away my intended bride, and when we have more leisure, shall hear the story in detail—but just now we are more interested in the outcome of your adventure."

"It mighty nigh come to a sudden eend," grinned Dirty Dick. "That durned old houn' dog got to dreamin' in his sleep an' got the nightmar', I reckon—anyhow he breathed so loud that they heard the noise inside, an' one o' the gal critters come an' peeked through the key-hole. She was mighty sly about it, but I smelt her breath, or ha'r, or somethin', an' knowed thar was a right smart chaine o' my gittin' snaked in out o' the cold, unless I made myself mighty skeerce, in a hurry, too!"

"I couldn't run, fer the outside door was shet an' fastened, an' afore I could open it, they would be onto me. Course I mought 'a' stood an' faced the racket, but my orders didn't say nothin' 'bout wipin' 'em out, an' so I jist slid behind that bun'le o' hides, pullin' a dirty blanket over my head. Nur I wasn't none too quick, nuther, fer the door slammed wide open, an' out the two greasers le'pt, knife an' pistol."

"I could peek out from onder a corner o' the blanket, an' I hed a barker in each han', thumb on hammer an' finger on trigger, ready to let blizzer ef they should smell me out. I could 'a' dropped them both in thar tracks, afore they could guess what hit 'em—"

"If you only had!" ejaculated the Californian, in which he was most sincerely joined by John Vanderslice.

"You never hinted sech a thing, an' you should know by this time that when you speak, I hev l'arnt to foller orders plum' to a ha'r, boss," quietly added Dirty Dick.

"I know. You are not to blame—just the contrary. But if I could only have foreseen such a glorious chance—"

"Mebbe 'tain't too late yit. Say the word, an' back I go. I kin git inside an' somehow manidge to draw 'em out o' thar hole. 'Twon't be the fust time I've tackled bigger odds than two to one, an' still come out top o' the heap. These may be better men than the common run, but ef you say so, I'll tackle 'em—an' one thing you kin 'pend on. Even ef they rub me out, they won't neither on 'em live long enough to make thar brags over it."

From almost any lips, such a speech would sound like boasting, but not so now. Dirty Dick spoke without the slightest effort at display, and his hearers knew that he was ready to make his words good at the slightest nod.

Raymon Salcedo hesitated for a moment, but then banished the temptation.

"Time enough for that when more prudent measures fail. Your life is too valuable to be thrown away, Dick."

"'Tain't my life. It's yours," was the simple response that contained more than an ordinary volume.

"Go on. Tell what followed. Of course you were not discovered!" added Salcedo, sinking back in his chair.

"No," laughed Dirty Dick. "That old houn' pup saved me. The greasers stumbled over him, an' the critter you called Carlos bu'st out a-laffin'. 'Thar's the man you heard a-breathin', sister,' he said, pattin' the dog on the head. 'Tain't possible any human critter could git in here to spy onto us, unless Stefano let him in, an' the old man is true as gold!"

"With that they all went inside an' shut the door, takin' the houn' pup with them. I waited a bit, to make sure they wasn't tryin' no root games onto me, then crep' out an' glued my ear to the keyhole ag'in. What I then heerd, come to somethin' like this:

"They laid the trouble with those four men, to you, boss. Carlos 'cluded you hed found him out, an' wanted to put him out o' the way, so you could steal the little gal back ag'in an' marry her as you at fust intended."

"An admirable guess," laughed the Californian. "But go on."

"Carlos is gritty! thar ain't no denyin' of that. He swore he'd fight it out to the bitter eend—that he'd not only claim the money that was left to Nicholas, but that he'd hunt up the missin' proofs an' make sure o' that land-grant."

"They went on to talk about a 'portant witness somewhar up in the diggin's—at Hangtown when last heerd from—an' 'cluded to set out after him right away. T'other feller was in fer takin' the wimmin along, but Carlos overruled that. 'Twasn't no place fer decent women, he said, let alone the resk o' your strikin' thar trail an' makin' things hot fer 'em all. An' at last it was 'cided to leave them ahind, though both gals kicked mighty hard ag'inst that."

A cry of delight from the lips of Raymon Salcedo interrupted Dirty Dick at this juncture.

"Good! the fools are playing exactly into our hands! The brothers will never return alive, or even if they should escape us, the women will be safe. Stefano Arroyal—"

"Don't count on the old greaser, boss—"

"Bah! he dare not refuse any demand I may see fit to make of him. He knows that one word from me, spoken in the right quarter, would fit a noose around his neck."

"I ain't disputin' that, boss, but he *can't* do nothin'—"

"You said that the women were to be left behind!"

"Yas, but not with the greaser. You wouldn't wait to hear me out," equably retorted Dirty Dick. "Carlos was afeared you would scent 'em out, if left anywhar in town, so it was 'cluded to pack up at once an' leave afore daylight come. He—Carlos—said he hed some good friends livin' at the Mission whar they mought leave thar wives with easy minds."

"We can waylay them on the way thither," observed John Vanderslice, but Dirty Dick shook his head negatively.

"Thar wouldn't hardly be time fer that now. They set about packin' up at once, an' I bar'ly hed time to skin out afore I saw Carlos leave the house after hosses to take them to the Mission. They've started afore this, I reckon."

"And you have lost time in telling such a long-winded story when a dozen words would have sufficed!" growled the gambler, angrily.

"An' so kep' you from makin' another flash in the pan," was the cool retort.

"Dick is right, friend John," interposed Salcedo, his brow clearing up. "There is no such great hurry, after all. Both Carlos and Joaquin must be put safely out of the way before we can hope to hold our fair prizes securely. We all know that they are no ordinary men. However bitterly we may hate them, we would be fools to deny this. To kill them will be no easy task, unless our plans are laid so perfectly that they will not be given a single loophole of escape."

"I think I see how this can be done—if only we knew for certain how they propose to travel—"

"I was goin' to tell ye that, when you snapped me up," said Dirty Dick. "They leave the wimmin critters at the Mission, then ketch the stage for Sacramento. Beyond that they didn't say."

"No need," and Raymon Salcedo laughed aloud with diabolical glee. "I doubt if they ever reach Sacramento—most assuredly they will never leave it, if they get there, of their own will!"

"Now, senior," he added, turning to John Vanderslice, "I feel that I can trust you in this matter, for you are quite as deeply interested as I. You must contrive to abduct both women and save Nicholas, wife of Carlos Murieta, for me. I offer no suggestions, for I believe you are quite capable of carrying out your share of the work to perfect success. I only stipulate that you take my prize with yours, and that you treat Nicholas as kindly as circumstances will allow."

"I pledge you my word of honor," said John Vanderslice, reaching his hand across the table, where it was warmly clasped by his fellow-conspirator. "And you, senior?"

Raymon Salcedo laughed again, then replied: "I am tolerably sure that you will soon hear of the stage coach for Sacramento being stopped by road-agents, and that two of the passengers have been killed—accidentally, of course!"

CHAPTER VII.

"HELD UP" BY ROAD-AGENTS.

"HALT! Up with your hands, driver, unless you want to get salivated by a brace of blue pills!"

The startling summons was not as familiar at that day as it became in after years, nor had the "holding up" of mail and passenger coaches as yet been reduced to a science, but neither driver nor his passengers could doubt the full meaning of the words hurled at them by a tall masked figure, who spoke over a brace of leveled revolvers.

The surprise was well planned and complete. One moment all was peace and security so far as the uninitiated eye could discover, the next, three stout lassoes crossed the narrow roadway,

one calculated to strike just below the knees of the horses should a bold dash be attempted, a second level with their breasts, a third to strike the body of the stage and either sweep the box-seat clear or pin its occupants securely to their perch. A tall, armed and disguised man stepped forth to utter his startling challenge, two men darted to the heads of the snorting leaders, while sundry others exposed themselves among the bushes with a formidable display of firearms and cold steel.

Two men were with the driver upon the box-seat, while the interior of the coach was crowded with stout and well-armed men, packed together like sardines in a box. Yet there seemed to be naught but terror and confusion among them. Not a weapon was drawn, only a hurried shrinking away from the open windows on either side, with the ostrich-like idea of hiding from the lead that seemed on the point of leaping forth from those wicked-looking tubes of death.

Only those who "have been there" can even remotely imagine the senseless panic which even a single bold-talking man can inspire in an entire coach load of men, any one of whom, if given due warning, might prove his equal in daring. It is the unexpected that shakes the nerves. There is neither leader nor concert of action. And so the passengers are robbed by one-tenth their own number, and really brave men are branded by the newspapers as cowards.*

"Ready with your weapons, men!" called out the masked leader of the road-agents, his voice stern and menacing. "Riddle that hears and its contents at the first sign of resistance! And you, gentlemen travelers, prepare to alight, one by one, with both hands up and free from weapons. He who hesitates or gives us the slightest unnecessary trouble, had far better never been born. This is business, remember!"

The men in ambush pressed a little closer, their firearms cocked and leveled, but it was evident from their manner that neither they nor their chief anticipated any actual resistance on the part of the surprised and demoralized passengers.

The point for an ambush had been wisely selected. At that point the road-bed was narrow, barely sufficient for the cumbersome vehicle to pass through. On the right hand were thick lying rocks and scrubby bushes. On the other side the ground was a trifle lower for a yard or two, then abruptly descended for some fifty feet to where a narrow stream coursed swiftly through the gorge. The brink of this canyon was fringed by bushes and brambles, hiding completely what there was beyond, and only for the sullen roaring of the confined waters below, a stranger to the spot would never suspect the existence of the gorge at first glance.

"Come—tumble out, lively!" cried out the road-agent chief, growing impatient and sending a revolver bullet through the top of the coach, above the heads of the startled travelers. "No personal harm shall be done to those who obey promptly, but the last man to set foot outside shall be stripped and lashed until the blood runs!"

A more effective appeal could scarcely have been shaped in words. No longer thinking of their purses, but intent only on saving their backs from the lash, the passengers dashed the door open, fighting furiously to be the first to emerge.

With the common herd we have nothing to do at present. Joaquin and Carlos Murieta, having, as they imagined, placed their wives in absolute safety with trusty friends, living at the Mission of San Francisco Dolores, three miles out from the town of San Francisco, caught the stage and were now among the luckless "insiders." At the first alarm, they were both quite as badly demoralized as any of their fellow-travelers, but then a great light burst upon Carlos Murieta—for he recognized the voice of the masked chief of road-agents!

Until then he had not given a thought of resisting the outlaws, but now he knew that something more than mere robbery was intended. Or, even if this masked man was at that moment ignorant that the brothers were aboard, the instant they alighted, recognition would follow—after that, death!

The brothers Murieta had been seated side by side, and were still crowded together. Carlos grasped Joaquin by the arm, and hurriedly muttered in his ear:

"The trap is laid for us—that man is Raymon Salcedo—I can swear to his voice! If we surrender, we will be murdered in cold blood. What had we best do?"

Joaquin Murieta, though yet only a boy in years, was a man in courage and coolness.

*I speak from personal experience. On one occasion nine passengers were "held up" and robbed by three men. Of the nine—"one of whom I was which," to my sorrow—there were four men, all armed, who, before and since, have proved themselves of far more than ordinary courage and coolness. Yet not a grain of powder was burnt on that occasion, and three men sent us nine on our way without money enough in the crowd "to buy a second-hand flap-jack," as one fellow dolefully observed.

The moment he realized the truth of what his brother said—that they alone were the prey aimed at by these ruffians—all traces of hesitation vanished.

"Fight, of course!" he cried, drawing up one knee until his foot rested against the door on the side of the coach furthest from the enemy.

"Follow me—to cover, then let them take us!" One fierce thrust of his foot dashed open the barrier, and Joaquin leaped lightly from the vehicle, closely followed by his brother Carlos.

So far as they could see, in that moment of confusion and excitement, all of the enemy were stationed on the opposite side of the coach, save the two men who still clung to the heads of the frightened lead horses. Unfortunately for themselves, the brothers were given no time to reflect upon this important fact, else the catastrophe which followed might have been averted.

Scarcely had Joaquin's feet touched the ground when a loud, angry cry from the lips of the road-agent chief told that he had discovered the move, and his pistol hand was flung out as he yelled:

"Halt! face this way and throw up your hands, or you die like sheep-killing curs!"

Almost literally his command was obeyed, for Joaquin Murieta whirled as on a pivot and flung up his right hand—but that hand clasped the polished butt of a trusty revolver, and as a jet of ruddy smoke spouted forth from the leveled tube, a wild, unearthly shriek burst from the lips of the masked road-agent. His arms were flung aloft, the weapons fell from his nerveless fingers, and only for the supporting arms of a man who bounded to his side, the outlaw leader would have plunged face downward into the rocky trail.

"Fire, cuss ye!" screamed the man who had hastened to the aid of his stricken chieftain. "Kill the devils as murdered the boss—kill 'em—blow 'em to h—l an' back ag'in!"

Blending with this angry screech came the clear voice of Joaquin Murieta as the form of Carlos alighted beside him.

"Cover, brother! We will foil the hounds after all!"

As he spoke, Joaquin made a swift leap across the narrow space and plunged into the fringe of brambles and bushes which concealed the canyon from view.

There was no time for looking before he leaped. The road-agents, for an instant demoralized by the fall of their leader when they believed that all danger of resistance was past, were aroused to a sense of their delinquency by the angry yell of their fellow, and their firearms began to speak, bullets whistling and singing viciously around the daring brothers.

One panther-like leap carried Joaquin into and through the deceptive fringe of bushes. An involuntary cry escaped him as he realized the fresh peril into which he had plunged headlong, but there was no such thing as saving himself then.

Carlos heard the cry, saw the clear light of open space shining through the opening of the body of his brother had tore in the brambles, and for the first time recognized the roar of the confined torrent below. His own danger was forgotten in the love he bore his brother, and he leaped to the opening, pausing on the brink of the canyon for an instant as he beheld the body of Joaquin roll to the very verge of the bubbling waters, there to be checked by a point of rock and lie motionless like one utterly bereft of sense, or else dead.

In that brief pause, Carlos felt a bullet sting his shoulder, barely breaking the skin, but the pain was sufficient to recall him to a full sense of the peril which threatened, and he leaped over the escarpment, alighting safely on a small point of rock, then dropping to a second and a third, with all the rapidity and accuracy of a mountain sheep.

He reached the body of Joaquin, raised it in his powerful arms, then cast a glance upward. He saw the masked face of more than one enemy peering down at him over the leveled tubes of revolvers and rifles. To hesitate meant death, and he dashed away from the water's edge just as the weapons exploded and the leaden missiles clove the space he had abandoned. Before a second volley could be fired, Carlos, with Joaquin in his arms, was crouching down beneath a slightly projecting ledge of rock, above which grew a thin clump of vine-wreathed shrubs.

Fierce yells of chagrin came from above, and bullet after bullet cut through the bushes, clipping leaves and twigs in their passage to spend themselves upon the insensate rock below.

Carlos did not seem to hear these, as he bent over the body of his younger brother. Those keen black eyes were closed now. The smooth, boyish face was scratched, bruised and bleeding. To all outward appearance Carlos Murieta held a corpse in his arms.

As this fear assailed him afresh, a startling change came over Carlos Murieta. His handsome countenance grew convulsed—not with grief, but a mad, insane fury. His eyes blazed like those of an infuriated wild beast.

He gently laid the body of his brother on the ground, then bent his own head in an attitude

of listening as he drew his pistols and mechanically looked to see if the caps were well on the nipples.

The firing ceased abruptly, as though the road-agents believed their game either dead or disabled. And then a smile, dark and deadly, curled the thin lips of the Sonorian as he distinctly caught the words:

"Bah! the devils are both dead, riddled by our bullets. Stand aside—I will lead the way. Those who are not cowards will follow after to help drag the carrion up the cliff!"

Then came a scratching, scrambling sound, and as Carlos Murieta cautiously rose up and peered through the bullet-splintered cover, he saw several men preparing to follow the man who had spoken, down the stout lasso, one end of which was fastened securely above.

Slowly and cautiously he raised the hammers of his revolvers, fearful lest the sharp click of the tumblers should reach the ears of his enemies and prematurely warn them of the danger that threatened. But no such fears seemed to trouble the road-agents. At such close range, it seemed an utter impossibility for their game to have escaped death or wounds that would render them helpless, and guarding only against the dangers of a fall, two men were already descending by the aid of the lariat.

Carlos could wait no longer without running a risk he was cool enough to avoid. If given too much time, the men on the lasso might easily leap aside into one of the numerous clefts and niches in the canyon wall, where they would prove dangerous neighbors.

Thrusting both revolvers through the thin cover, he covered the closely crowded group on the level above, and fired. That at least one of his missiles had taken effect was plain from the wild scream of pain which followed the unexpected shots, and the enemy melted from his view like magic. Then with a mad, ferocious cry, the Sonorian rose up and confronted the doomed wretches who were clinging to the frail support that alone kept them from being dashed upon the cruel rocks below. That they fully realized their peril, was clear from the pale, fear-distorted countenances turned toward the enemy whom they had counted as dead, in silent appeal for mercy.

Mercy! As well expect it from the bullet-stung tigress whose butchered cubs are lying at her feet!

Carlos Murieta believed his loved brother dead, if not killed by these men, slain because of them, and had he possessed the power, he would joyfully have dealt out ten thousand deaths in one to those fear-paralyzed wretches. As it was, his usually handsome, even gentle features were more like those of a malignant fiend than aught human, as he leveled his unerring revolver at the lower figure and fired.

Not a sound came from the lips of the death-stricken man as his gripe relaxed and his carcass shot down with a sickening thud upon the bare rocks beneath.

Swift as thought the young Sonorian shifted his aim, and like an echo of the first, a second death-shot rung sharply on the still air. A spray of blood marked where the bullet had entered the ribs of the doomed outlaw, but though fatal, the wound was not as sure and speedy as the former.

A gasping, gurgling cry of mingled pain and horror bubbled from the lips of the road-agent as he clung desperately to the slender rope with hands and feet, his head falling back, his frightfully distorted face upturned to the smiling heavens. Slowly, inch by inch the luckless wretch was slipping down the lasso, as the life-blood flowed in a weakening stream from his side.

Truly, a most horrible picture, but Carlos Murieta laughed aloud in savage glee as he gloated over his revenge.

Only for a moment. Then there came a sharp explosion from close behind him, and the road-agent, a bullet through his brain, fell from the rope to the rocks below, mercifully put out of his misery!

A cry of amazement from Carlos Murieta, as he felt himself grasped by the shoulder and dragged down behind cover, just in time to escape a rifle ball which would otherwise have bored its way through his brain. But he heeded not this narrow escape, even if he realized it, for the one who had fired that merciful shot, the one whose hand still grasped his arm, was none other than his brother Joaquin whom he had mourned over as dead!

"Holy Virgin! brother, I thought you dead!" he gasped, then, realizing the glad truth, he flung his arms around Joaquin, clasping him to his breast with a fervor that made the young Sonorian wince.

The perceptions of love are very keen, and Carlos noticed this flinching. Instantly his grasp relaxed, and he gazed into Joaquin's face with an anxiety the most intense.

"You are hurt—wounded?"

Joaquin laughed slightly as he shook himself. "Nothing worse than a score or two of bones broken and dislocated, I believe. No, I am sound enough," he added quickly as he saw that

Carlos could not appreciate the doleful jest. "I am worth a dozen dead men yet, though I feel as sore and tender as though I had fallen from the clouds instead of only rolling down those rocks. And you, brother?"

"Creased in one or two places, I believe, but nothing below the skin," was the cool response as he began reloading the empty chambers of his revolvers. "Miserably poor shots; those rascals up yonder. One consolation: they will know more about good snooting, before we bid them adios!"

"If we ever do," gravely added Joaquin.

"Bah! don't croak, Joaquin," carelessly uttered the elder brother. "I read them one lesson, single-handed. You and I can handle double the number there is left."

"On equal footing, no doubt. But they have got us in a trap from which we can hardly escape without their consent. They will not expose themselves so foolishly again, after the severe lesson you read them. They can lie close under cover up yonder, and the moment we uncover, can and will pick us off without giving us a chance to deal a return blow."

"Well, if we can't go up, neither can they come down here, unless as dead men," retorted Carlos, always bound to look at life on the brightest side. "We can wait patiently here until the sun goes down and darkness comes as a friendly shelter. Then we can steal away, either up or down the canyon, even though they were a hundred where they are one, and all gifted with the eyes of an owl or a cat!"

"The darkness that aids us, will serve to cover their movements also," gravely observed the young Sonorian. "They are wise enough to foresee and guard against just such a movement on our parts. They can place an ambush both above and below, selecting the most favorable points before the light fails them. No, brother, it is worse than folly to try and blind ourselves to the truth. We are trapped, and if our enemies are persistent, we can escape only by a miracle."

"Hardly that," coolly responded Carlos. "There is one road open to us which they cannot ambush. We are neither of us fish, and for choice I would hardly select so damp a trail, but if the worst comes to the worst, we can swim over to yonder rift in the wall, and thus give these *ladrones* the slip."

Joaquin made no reply as he turned his eyes upon the stream. Suddenly contracted to less than one half its usual width, and flowing between nearly perpendicular walls, the river did not afford the most agreeable prospect in the proposed light. The waters roared sullenly as they tumbled and tossed along as though coursing madly through some gigantic mill-race, beating furiously against the wall where an abrupt bend was made by the canyon, only a few rods below where the brothers crouched, on the same side they occupied. All along the water bubbled and boiled like the contents of an enormous caldron. Though narrow, to cross the stream safely, a man must fairly equal a fish in skill and activity.

"It might be done," slowly uttered Joaquin, "but only as a last resource. One chance out of a hundred—not more than that."

Carlos seemed impressed with the gravity of his brother, and for a few moments they crouched under their slight cover in silence. Not a sound came from above, and it almost seemed as though the road-agents had been awed into flight by the terrible doom which had overtaken at least two of their men. But neither of the brothers entertained this idea for a moment. They felt sure that the enemy were waiting and watching for the proper moment to strike a sure and final blow.

"If there was any way of getting at the cowardly curs!" growled Carlos, as he uneasily shifted his position, "I would rather fight a dozen of them, hand to hand, than lie here like a wolf in its den with hounds yelping just beyond its reach!"

"I could bear it better if I only knew that our wives were safe," seriously uttered Joaquin, his face clouded.

"Safe?" echoed his brother. "What do you mean? I can answer for the fidelity of Manuel Sepulveda with my life."

"Yet he may be deceived. Tell me—are you sure that the man who acted as chief of those *ladrones* was Ramon Salcedo?"

"As sure as sure could be without seeing his face. I recognized his voice. And then, if they were merely common brigands, would they hunt us so closely, when they know that they will get far more hard knocks than gold coins? Would they not draw off after such severe losses? And, above all, would they let the stage escape them while after us?"

"A desire for revenge may account for all that."

"You shot Raymon Salcedo when you shot that masked man," positively uttered Carlos Murieta. "I am only sorry that he did not fall by my own hand—"

"It may be that he is not dead. It was but a snapshot at the best—there was time for no more. If so—if he still lives, and is the man you suspect—then the persistence with which they seek our lives is explained. But how can

you explain this? You were confident that Raymon Salcedo was in San Francisco last night—that his tools were those who attacked you. Then how comes he here at the head of this gang of outlaws to-day?"

"He may have followed us—his spies may have informed him of our departure for Sacramento."

"Just so; and there you have the reasons for my fears concerning our wives. If Raymon Salcedo learned of our taking this stage, since we joined it on the road, then he must know where we left our wives."

Carlos was disagreeably impressed by the logic of these words, but quickly rallied.

"Raymon Salcedo cannot be in two places at one and the same time. He is *here*, dead, dying or at least wounded. He can do our dear ones no harm. If I am satisfied, *you* should be, since he can hold no grudge against *your* wife. Besides, Manuel Sepulveda is true as steel. I warned him to never relax his watchfulness, and, to explain the danger, I told him the whole story. Rest at ease, brother. I only wish we were as safe as Nicholas and Carmela are at this moment."

"You may be right—I hope and pray you are," seriously added Joaquin. "For us it does not so much matter. We are men, used to dealing with dangers—"

He paused abruptly, then, with a strange, inarticulate cry, he flung himself upon his astounded brother, hurling him aside with the strength of a madman!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDNIGHT JOURNEY.

THE Mission of San Francisco Dolores, at the time of which this story treats, differed but little from the numerous other missions scattered here and there throughout the State. Situated some three miles from the city, on a level and fertile plain, the buildings were surrounded on every side by fruit trees and grape vines, in places fairly hidden from outward view by the dense foliage.

The Mission proper was a little separated from the other buildings, and consisted of a large, profusely ornamented church, commodious buildings for the ministers, store-houses and granaries, offices for soap-makers, weavers, blacksmiths and other artisans, with corrals for horses and cattle, separate apartments for the young Indians of each sex, and such offices as were necessary at the time of its institution, all composed of adobes, or the national sun-dried brick. The Mission formed a miniature town by itself, with narrow streets, and was under a regular government, it, as well as all the other missions in the State at that date, being under the management of the religious order of San Francisco.

Father Jesus Maria was then sole administrator of the Mission with which this portion of our story deals, and the flourishing state of affairs proved him to be the right man in the right place. Nothing was done save by his direction. He superintended the tilling of the ground, the gathering of the harvest, the slaughtering of the cattle, the weaving—in fact, was the hub around which the settlement revolved.

The Indians had built their rancheria at some little distance from the Mission buildings, their rude huts being scattered thickly around with little pretensions to order or regularity. Conical piles of brush, covered with grass and bulrushes, for the most part composed their habitations.

Opposite the rancheria and near the Mission was a small garrison or mud fort, to accommodate half a dozen soldiers, commanded by a corporal, with their families. Their principal duty was to guard against any uprising or revolt on the part of the Indians, but a more important one in reality was that which now engaged Corporal Martinez.

"The rules and regulations are very strict, father," the gallant soldier was saying, an occasional lurch of his very erect body betraying the fact of his having freely indulged his appetite for strong drink. "It cuts me to the heart's core to refuse, but it is strict obedience or the loss of rank."

"It is a sad loss of precious time!" grumbled the other, a tall, portly man, in the garb of a mendicant friar. "Two souls may be far on the road to Purgatory before I can return, as it is. And now this vexatious loss of time, a foolish observance of a rule established during time of war."

"Nevertheless, a rule it is, padre," hiccupped Corporal Martinez. "I revere your cloth—as well I may, since I hope to reach Heaven through its virtues—but all who come here after the sunset bell must be taken before Father Jesus Maria, or else lie beyond the walls until a new day."

"Lead on, then," growled the friar, submitting to the inevitable.

There is no necessity for following the worthy pair before the ruler of San Francisco Dolores. Enough that Fra Serapio came forth after a time, flushed and angry-looking, but having secured the permission he sought—leave to see Manuel Sepulveda and deliver to him an important message of which he was the bearer.

"This is the place," said Corporal Martinez, knocking at one of the stout doors. "Good speed in your holy mission, and bear in mind the lesson read you by the noble father. Avoid strong drink and cards as you would the devil. Be virtuous, and you will be happy."

"Begone, thou scurvy knave, or I will blister ye with curses from the crown of your head to the sole of your feet!" cried the indignant monk, and the worthy corporal marched stiffly back to his quarters.

The heavy door soon opened, and a man's voice demanded what was wanted.

"I came with a message of the utmost importance to the two ladies now enjoying the hospitality of your roof—if you be Manuel Sepulveda, as I am led to believe," smoothly responded the friar, all traces of anger vanishing.

"That is my name, but I do not know you," was the reply, in a much gruffer tone than before.

"No wonder—in the dark, so," laughed the monk. "But you are wasting time, every moment of which is more precious than gold. I have complied with the rules—Father Jesus Maria sent me hither. Let me enter and deliver my message to those who are alone entitled to receive it."

His voice grew stern and authoritative, and Manuel Sepulveda mechanically gave way.

"Lead me to the Senoras Murieta at once. My business is with them," added Fra Serapio in the same tone of authority.

Manuel Sepulveda was more than usually free from the common superstition of his priest-ridden countrymen, but now he yielded meekly and ushered the friar into a room where sat Carmela and Nicholas Murieta.

Fra Serapio extended his fat, dirty hands as though bestowing a silent blessing upon the startled girl-wives, then drew a soiled bit of dingy paper from his pouch.

"I am the reluctant bearer of mournful tidings, my daughters," he said, in a grave tone, half extending the scrap of paper. "But remember it might have been worse—they are still alive—"

He was interrupted by faint cries of apprehension from the suddenly blanching lips of Carmela and Nicholas. Manuel Sepulveda, whose face had grown hard and suspicious the moment the lamp-light fell fairly upon the face of the friar, stepped forward and snatched the paper from his fingers before his purpose could be divined. A single glance sufficed for him to master the writing it contained, and as he noted the signature, a short, hard laugh came from his lips.

"You are the person they call Fra Serapio, I believe?" he demanded, boldly facing the frowning priest.

"An humble follower of the blessed Virgin—yes."

"If a follower at all, it is at so great a distance that I fear you will never succeed in getting within hailing distance of your guiding star!" sneered Sepulveda. "Bah! do you take me for a blind idiot? This is a clumsy forgery—"

"Stop!" was the stern interruption. "I wrote those words as they fell feebly and brokenly from the lips of Joaquin Murieta."

"My husband—what of him?" gasped Carmela, springing forward and kneeling at the feet of the friar. "Tell me—he is alive and well? Speak—for the love of Mary!"

Fra Serapio's angry frown vanished like magic, and an expression of deep sympathy overspread his broad, massive face as he stooped and gently raised the girl-wife to her feet, supporting her trembling form with his strong right arm.

"Alive—yes, I trust I may say that much, daughter. But not well—alas! that I must say so to your loving ears! He is severely hurt—both he and his brother, Carlos."

A moaning, sobbing cry came from the lips of Nicholas, and she drooped like a frost-bitten lily—but only for a brief space. She rallied and, though pale as a ghost, there was no tremor perceptible in either voice or figure.

"Lead us to our husbands, holy father. We will go, at once. We need no time for preparation—"

"Wait," interposed Manuel Sepulveda, his manner a little less abrupt, but to the full as resolute. "If what this man says is true, the loss of a few moments can make but little difference in the end, and can easily be made up by a little harder riding when we do start. You, ladies, were placed under my care and protection by my good friend, Carlos Murieta. He told me that he had cunning and unscrupulous enemies, who might try to strike him through his heart of hearts—meaning *you*, senora. And before he bade me adieu, he urged me again to be on my guard against all snares—to never suffer either of you out of my sight for a moment until he returned to relieve me of my charge."

"But he sends for us, instead. You hold the appeal in your hand, even now," quietly replied Nicholas.

"It may be so, and it may not," muttered the still unconvinced Spaniard. "There are

such things as forgeries, and wolves in sheep's clothing."

"I pledged myself to deliver the message," coldly uttered Fra Serapio, extending his hand for the paper. "I will read it, to save trouble. 'Twas written with a hastily-made pen of reed, and for ink I used the blood that flowed from their wounds—"

A loud, angry cough from Manuel Sepulveda drowned the last sentence, and without completing it, Fra Serapio read aloud the contents of the paper:

"You can trust the bearer, who will kindly guide you to this place. We are hurt—Carlos and I—how badly, cannot be told as yet. The stage was stopped by ladrones—but Fra Serapio can give all particulars. Come—if you would see us once more in this life!"

Such were the contents of the note, without date or address, but at the bottom two names, Joaquin and Carlos, were traced in feeble, uncertain characters.

"You see?" and Carmela turned to her kind host. "We are summoned—we must obey—and at once."

"I am your slave, senora—but I am also responsible for your safety," was the grave reply. "If this should prove to be one of the cunning snares which Carlos suspected and warned me of, as I fear is the case, how could I ever face my friend again?"

"I have performed my duty thus far," said Fra Serapio, in a cold, measured tone. "I am ready to perform it to the end in the same conscientious manner, if I am permitted to do so. But if you, senor, refuse to suffer these ladies to depart, I can do no more. At least I will be relieved of a long and toilsome ride."

"Stop, father," and Sepulveda grasped the friar by one arm. "I have a question or two to ask you before you go. When and where was the stage ambushed? How were our friends wounded? Where are they now? And how came they to choose you as their messenger?"

"I would refuse to submit to your insolence, had I not promised to use every means in my power to return with these ladies to their wounded, it may be dying husbands. I wash my hands of the consequence. Should they, one or both, die unshriven through this delay, the curse will fall on your head, Manuel Sepulveda, not on theirs or mine!"

"We will go with you, holy father," cried Nicholasa, displaying a degree of courage and decision such as she had never been given credit for. "If this friend of my husband refuses to help us, we will still go, on foot!"

"There shall be no delay through me," quietly said Manuel Sepulveda, uttering a signal that brought a tall, stout, fine-looking young man into the room. "Garcia, go prepare horses for the road. Take the best—five at least. Or," turning toward the friar, "have you your own horse, father?"

"The poor creature I rode fell dead beneath me, scarce a mile from the Mission," replied Fra Serapio.

Manuel Sepulveda signed his son to depart, and added:

"We cannot start before the horses are made ready. In the mean time, father, we will listen to your story. And bear this point in mind. Unless my doubts are removed, I will exercise the authority placed in me by Carlos Murieta, and refuse to endanger the ladies by suffering them to leave this shelter."

"You mean well, senor, but you can keep us here only by force," cried Nicholasa.

"For your own good, senora, I would not hesitate to go even that far," quietly replied Sepulveda. "Now, father!"

"I was journeying to Sacramento by the same stage as the two unfortunate men whom I knew not then, but afterward learned were Carlos and Joaquin Murieta. About the middle of the afternoon, the stage was stopped by road-agents who threatened to murder each and every one who ventured to offer any resistance. Acting like madmen, as I then considered, the brothers leaped from the coach and shot down the chief of the road-agents. Then ensued a confused and terrible fight. I cannot describe it. I am not a man of war, and I frankly admit that the sight of human blood turns me sick and faint at heart. All I can say, is that when all was over, I found the *ladrones* had been defeated, and that both Carlos and Joaquin Murieta were terribly wounded."

"After a conversation, it was decided that to attempt their removal by means of the stage would be fatal, so they were carried on litters to a miner's cabin not far from the spot where the stage was ambushed, and then they wrote this message to you. I alone volunteered to bring it here. I was afoot, and there was great necessity for haste. One of the stage horses had been crippled, so the passengers together bought its mate, and bade me spare it not until I reached the Mission. I obeyed—and here I am."

Manuel Sepulveda listened intently and eyed Fra Serapio keenly while this report was being delivered, but he failed to discover anything to strengthen his suspicions. The story was plain and straightforward. But he asked one question:

"You say that at the time you considered Carlos and Joaquin Murieta were acting like madmen. What led you to change this opinion?"

"The reason Carlos gave for acting as he did, when I was binding up his wounds. He said he recognized the voice of the outlaw chief as belonging to a bitter enemy. He gave me the name: Raymon Saltillo, or something similar—"

"Raymon Salcedo!" faltered Nicholasa.

"I will not be positive," thoughtfully added the friar. "It was a name something like that, though."

"The horses are ready," announced Garcia, returning.

"Very well. Arm yourself and take a supply of provisions."

"So! you are going to bear us company, Senor Sepulveda?"

"Yes. Have you any objections?" was the sharp demand.

"Not the slightest—why should I?" was the quiet response. "The more the better and safer. I only wish you could lead an army. Those evil rascals are growing so audacious."

This speech was uttered with such heartiness and sincerity that Sepulveda began to feel a little ashamed of the suspicions he had so openly expressed, but he was an obstinate man, and made no apologies, arming himself thoroughly and packing up a supply of food and drink, together with some simple medicines and ointments while Carmela and Nicholasa prepared for their midnight journey.

This did not consume much time, and within two hours from the time he first entered the Mission, Fra Serapio was in the saddle and leading the way through the moonlit night at a rapid pace.

We have not dwelt on the terrible, soul-sickening anxiety that kept the girl-wives on the rack, but once in the saddle, it was the stout, hardy men who required urging on, instead of the women.

Only one incident of note marked the first portion of their journey. Shortly after leaving the Mission behind them, Fra Serapio drew rein for a moment to point out the stiffening carcass of a horse lying by the road-side. It bore no saddle, and the bridle was not a riding one.

The last lingering doubt was driven from the mind of Manuel Sepulveda by this mute evidence of the truth of the story told by Fra Serapio, and as he bowed his head humbly, he muttered:

"I will do penance, father, when this journey is over."

"Not by my orders, son," was the gentle response. "I have erred, and my feet have too often strayed from the straight path they should follow. Your suspicions were not wholly unnatural, and your fidelity to the charge left you by your friend far outweighs the wrong done me. Forget it as I have, my son."

Urged on by the fears and anxiety of the girl-wives, the horses were pressed to their best speed, and space was rapidly devoured. The night was rarely beautiful, calm and only pleasantly cool. The stars twinkled brilliantly, and the nearly full moon shed a clear, silvery light that almost equaled that of the sun.

"Have we much further to ride, father?" ventured Carmela.

"Five or six miles—it may be a trifle more, for I am not familiar with the country around here. Luckily the trail is a plain one, so that we can hardly stray aside."

The level plain had long since been left behind them, but still the little party kept their horses to a steady gallop, the national gait, and mile after mile was being rapidly left behind them. But then a singular accident occurred.

The horse ridden by Fra Serapio suddenly stumbled and fell headlong, casting its corpulent rider far over its head. The friar alighted fairly upon his feet, as it seemed, but then sank down in a heap, a sharp cry of agony bursting from his lips.

Almost instantly Sepulveda was beside him, while Garcia looked to the fallen horse, around whose fore-legs was twisted a loose end of the lasso which hung at the saddle-bow. In some manner it had become unfastened, and, entangling the animal's feet, caused it to stumble and fall.

"You are not hurt, father?" anxiously cried Manuel, as he strove to raise the friar to his feet, but a half-stifed cry of pain followed, and the injured man's muscles relaxed.

"I fear I am," he gasped, shivering spasmodically. "My right leg—I fear it is broken! And my ankle—oh!"

The little party could hear his strong teeth grating together as he choked back another groan. Evidently he was suffering intense agony, and the injuries must be severe. But even in this extremity he was thoughtful of others.

"Build a fire—look to my hurts," he gasped between spasms of shivering. "It may be that no bones are broken—only a sprain—and if bandaged firmly, I may be able to ride."

Had their mission been less important, there would have been a prompt and general demurrer

to this suggestion, but at the remembrance of those two wounded, perhaps dying, dear ones lying helpless in the lone cabin, all felt a feverish longing to press forward, let the pain and suffering to any others be what it might.

Fra Serapio seemed to realize this, and his voice was sad as he spoke to the women:

"I would not ask this—would not delay you for a moment on my account, if I thought you could find the spot where our friends lie without my aid. But the cabin is a good ways from the road, and would be hard to discover even in the daytime. I fear you would only lose your way. Still, if you prefer, I will give you the closest description I can—"

"We will wait and learn the extent of your injuries before we decide," interrupted Manuel Sepulveda, gravely. "If there is no hope of your being able to ride soon, then I will leave Garcia here to guard and attend you, while I endeavor to find the cabin, with the ladies."

Garcia quickly kindled a fire, and by its light his father examined Fra Serapio's right leg. So far as he could ascertain, there were no bones broken or dislocated, but at both ankles and knees were discolored spots that seemed to indicate severe sprains.

Fra Serapio ground his teeth heavily during this examination, but uttered no cry nor moan. A gasp of relief came from his lips when Sepulveda announced the result of his search.

"Good! if it is only a sprain, I will soon be able to ride. I hear the trickling of water over yonder. If bandaged tightly and cold water applied, I think the pain will soon be relieved. Go—ah! I feel—faint—some—"

His head fell forward upon his bosom as his voice died away. Manuel Sepulveda quickly produced a brandy flask and held it to his lips. With difficulty the friar swallowed a portion of the liquor then looked up with a faint smile.

"Go—get the water. And Garcia, some bark for splints, if they should be needed. I am sorry—very sorry to trouble you—"

But neither of the men waited to listen to his regrets. They hastened away to perform the tasks set them, and speedily returned each with what he had gone after.

Brief as the interval was, Fra Serapio declared that the pain was less acute, adding:

"But the night air feels chilly, even with the fire. If the ladies would only sip a little of this good brandy, it would do them no harm. Heated by our long and hard ride, they may catch cold, else. Persuade them, my son," and he pressed the flask into Sepulveda's hand.

Manuel obeyed, but the girl-wives barely touched the liquor with their lips. Their mental distress was by far too intense for them to heed any trifling bodily discomfort.

Though neither father or son had felt the need of a stimulant before Fra Serapio made the suggestion, they now drank heartily, and then busied themselves with bandaging the discolored leg of the friar. This was soon accomplished quite to the satisfaction of all concerned, and the bandages thoroughly wet down with the ice-cold spring-water.

"Ah! already that frightful throbbing is growing less severe!" ejaculated Fra Serapio, settling back against the saddle which Sepulveda had placed for his ease. "In an hour at the most I will be able to ride. Meantime, do not worry more than you can help. The blessed Virgin will not allow this unlucky accident to prevent us from finding our poor friends in time. Have a cigar. That will help to pass the time away."

When did ever one of the Spanish race refuse such an offer? Manuel and Garcia each took a cigar from the case extended, and lighting them, squatted down by the fire.

The two poor women could not be so easily consoled. Their arms wound around each other, they sat down at a little distance, bewailing the unlucky accident that was keeping them from their husbands, who might even then be expending their last breath of life in unavailing moans for their loved ones.

Thus half an hour passed, and Carmela arose with an impatient cry, as she saw that both Manuel and Garcia Sepulveda were sleeping beside the fire.

"Father, can you not yet bear the pain of riding, if we go very slow and easy? Every moment lost here is an age of torture to us! We must go on—if not with, then without you!"

Fra Serapio made no answer in words, but cast a keen glance toward the forms of father and son. They had been sitting with arms clasping their drawn-up knees. Now their heads had drooped forward upon their knees, and they were breathing heavily like men in an unnatural, drugged slumber!

Slowly and with apparent difficulty the friar rose to his feet, and passed around the fire. He lifted the head of Manuel Sepulveda, but the eyes were closed, and a push sent him rolling over, where he lay like a log! Another rude thrust, and his son Garcia bore him company!

A cry of wonder and dismay burst from Carmela's lips as she saw this. Surely this sleep was not natural.

A harsh disagreeable laugh startled her, and she saw that Fra Serapio was rapidly cutting the bandages from his leg and casting them into the

fire! Her face turned pale as that of a ghost as she staggered back into the arms of Nicholasa, who, startled by the cry, had come forward.

"So! your eyes are beginning to open to the truth at last, my dears!" laughed the friar, stamping his right foot firmly upon the ground as though to remove the last lingering doubt.

"A miraculous cure, is it not?"

"Then—you were not injured?" faltered the bewildered girl.

"No more than you were. It was only a little ruse to gain time. You were pressing on so rapidly—"

"And Joaquin—our husbands?"

"Safe and sound, so far as I know," was the cool response. "I told the story I was sent to carry, but he who dispatched me was not Joaquin Murieta. I led you here—I played this trick, and then, to make matters more easy for my employer, I drugged the liquor these suspicious dogs drank, while they were getting water to dress my injured limb—ha! ha! And then, to make assurance doubly sure, I gave each a doctored cigar, prepared for their especial benefit."

The young wives listened to this startling revelation, scarce able to believe their ears. But then, as the false friar continued, the terrible, soul-sickening truth burst upon them. They were miserably betrayed—for what dreadful purpose?

Maddened by despair, Carmela plucked a slender dagger from her bosom and leaped upon the traitor. Taken by surprise, Fra Serapio flung up one arm to guard his throat, and the weapon sunk deep between the bones. But then—before the girls could flee—the rapid clatter of horses' hoofs was heard, swiftly approaching.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REWARD OF A TRAITOR.

FRA SERAPIO started back with a yell of mingled rage and pain as the keen-pointed weapon pierced his brawny arm, and striking against the body of Manuel Sepulveda, his heels flew from under him and he fell heavily in a heap.

It was well for him that Carmela did not press the advantage thus gained, as she undoubtedly would have done only for the quick clatter of horses' hoofs that heralded the speedy arrival of a company of equestrians. Nicholasa, too, armed with the dangerous toy that almost invariably forms a portion of the toilet of every Spanish woman or girl, and who was about to join Carmela in her desperate attack upon their treacherous guide, turned toward the coming horsemen with a wild, appealing cry for help!

Fra Serapio quickly scrambled to his feet and plucked the slender stiletto from his arm, uttering a malignant laugh as the girl-wives repeated their appealing cries.

"They will aid you—they will care for you most tenderly, never fear, my daughters!" he cried, as the foremost horseman rode into the circle of firelight and leaped from the saddle. "Welcome, my son—but why the devil are you so late?"

What a sickening blow to the new-born hopes of those poor, betrayed girls! Those whom they looked to for aid and assistance, must be the friends of this evil man, else he would never have dared to address them thus. But a discovery ten-fold worse awaited poor Carmela, as the new-comer strode forward and rudely grasped her arm, thrusting his bearded face close to hers. A satanic smile curled his lip and revealed his white, wolfish teeth. His eyes glowed with the light of an unholy triumph.

One affrighted glance, and Carmela Murieta knew the worst—knew into whose hands she had fallen, and how little mercy she need expect to receive from him.

"Don Manuel Camplido!" she gasped, her lithe form trembling like a reed in his passionate grasp. "Merciful Mary! have pity on your poor daughter!"

Nicholasa recognized that name, and realized the terrible peril which threatened the sister-in-law whom she had already learned to love dearly. She gave no thought to her own danger at that moment, but as Carmela cried aloud, vainly striving to free herself from that loathsome grasp, the plucky little woman darted upon the villain stiletto in hand.

"Look to the infernal little wildcat, Serapio!" snarled John Vanderslice, as he swiftly interposed the form of his captive between himself and the menacing steel. "Seize and disarm her—thousand devils! man, why don't you draw her out?"

Active and powerful though he was, Fra Serapio did not find the task assigned him such an easy one. Swiftly eluding his first grasp, Nicholasa drew her weapon rapidly across his face, striking for his eyes. An instinctive flinching on his part saved his eyesight, but the hot blood spurted from a wound that laid open both cheeks and nearly severed the nose from his face. A fierce, howling curse of pain and anger told how sharply he was stung, and then his strong hands closed upon Nicholasa, crushing her mercilessly to the ground, where she would have been murdered by the furious traitor, only for the loud, stern cry of the gambler.

"Hold! you cursed fool! Dare to harm her and I will roast you alive! Disarm her—nothing more!"

Three men rode up at this juncture, and the two foremost, hearing the cry of John Vanderslice, leaped upon the maddened monk and tore him from his fainting victim.

With a swift dexterity, John Vanderslice wound the stout sash he wore around Carmela, binding both arms tightly to her sides, then releasing the nearly fainting girl, he sprung to where Nicholasa lay, panting and exhausted. A brief inspection satisfied him that she had received no material injury at the hands of her mad assailant, and with an air of decided relief, he arose and confronted Fra Serapio, who was sullenly trying to stanch the blood that streamed from his ugly wound.

"Lucky for you, my friend, that you did not seriously injure her," the gambler sternly uttered. "If you had—"

"It would have been no more than common justice," growled the enraged decoy. "Look at my face! The little she-devil has marked me for life! And the other—a knife through and through my arm! Thousand devils! If ever man earned his wages, then have I doubly won the paltry reward you offered me for leading these blessed wild-cats into your power!"

"What you have earned, that you shall promptly receive, Fra Serapio, never fear," returned John Vanderslice, with a short laugh. "But how came you so far ahead of time? We saw your signal fire when miles away, and though we rode with free rein and bloody spurs came near being too late."

"That was because I had to deal with women instead of men," growled the traitor friar. "I really believe those two are in love with their husbands! They urged their animals as though a legion of devils were chasing them! I could do no less than keep pace with them, for those rascals," with a sour glance toward the unconscious father and son, "provided atrociously good horses, and I dared not awaken their suspicions afresh after the difficulty I had in lulling them at first. Really, senor, when you hear all I have undergone, and what marvelous skill I have displayed in conducting this affair to complete success, I feel sure you will add a few onzas to the reward you first offered me."

"Never fear, Fra Serapio. I repeat that you shall not have occasion to complain of my liberality when all is settled," and John Vanderslice, with a grave bow, turned away from the wounded man and strode over to where the two women were guarded by one of his followers.

Nicholasa was just recovering from the brief swoon into which she had fallen when released from the deadly grasp of Fra Serapio.

"Bind her hands behind her, Parkhurst," the gambler said. "She is too free with her claws. Now you can go and help dress the padre's scratches. I will call when I need you."

The man addressed required no second hint, and strode away to the fire, where his comrades were attending to the wounds of the treacherous decoy, at the same time listening to his graphic recital of the satanic cunning he had displayed in carrying out the portion of the foul plot assigned him.

John Vanderslice—as Don Manuel Camplido for the present chose to call himself—sat down beside the bound and helpless girl-wife who had been so foully betrayed into his evil power. Devilish exultation was written upon his face and glittered in his black eyes.

"So! we meet again, Carmela Felix, and under very different circumstances from those which ruled when we last stood face to face. Then I was a captive, foredoomed to death, while you were a happy bride-elect, with the vows almost spoken that were, as you and he fondly fancied, to forever unite you and your dashing, gallant bridegroom. Now—you are the captive, I am the victor, and Joaquin Murieta is dead, food for worms—"

"A lie, false as the foul tongue that gives it utterance!" cried Carmela, her native spirit rallying beneath his bitter taunts. "Joaquin still lives—I know it, since you affirm the contrary, for never yet did your lying tongue shape the truth!"

John Vanderslice laughed sardonically. His soul was just small and mean enough to enjoy the vain flutterings of his helpless captive bird.

"Even granting that you are right, you are none the less lost. Dead or alive, you will never again see Joaquin Murieta. He robbed me of my betrothed—I rob him of his wife, and thus the old scores are made even. The revenge I swore then against both of you, has slumbered long, but it was ever alive. I patiently bided my time, knowing that sooner or later the longed-for chance must come. Come it has, and I struck all the more surely for being patient. And now my vengeance shall be as sweet as the past was bitter!"

The malignant scoundrel paused, as if to give Carmela a chance to answer, but she kept silence, and he believed that her spirit was at length utterly crushed.

"It is barely possible that Joaquin Murieta is still alive, but he is either dead or a prisoner in good hands. I bade my tools capture him, if

he did not give them too much trouble. If he could be brought to realize through his own senses, the perfection of my revenge upon you, Carmela, then my hatred would be completely satisfied, my cup of joy full even to running over!"

"We will soon know the result. I gave orders for word to be at once sent to me at a lonely cabin not far from here—the same described by my messenger, Fra Serapio, as that to which Joaquin and his brother were borne when wounded. You will bear me company thither, and if the expected messenger is dilatory, I will anticipate the announcement of your widowhood by giving you a new bridegroom—myself, lady!"

Even this devilish threat failed to arouse the poor girl, and feeling, perhaps, that there was little amusement to be found in this petty torture, John Vanderslice arose and summoned Parkhurst to resume his office of guard over the captive.

"Your injuries are not serious, I trust, Fra Serapio!" he asked, pausing beside the fire and addressing the friar.

"Painful enough!" growled the decoy, speaking with some difficulty, owing to the thick bandages that swathed his face.

"Still, you can ride a few miles, if necessary?"

"To the cabin, you mean?"

John Vanderslice nodded assent. Fra Serapio turned toward the motionless forms of Manuel Sepulveda and his son.

"And these sleeping hogs—what of them?" he demanded.

"Will they ever awaken in this world? You are sure you did not give them an overdose?" asked the gambler.

"I have used the drug too often for that," was the confident response. "They will awaken, with nothing worse than a severe headache to remind them of their sleep. Not to-night, but sometime during the forenoon the effects will wear off."

"So much the worse. You will have to give them a few inches of cold steel, padre," brutally added John Vanderslice.

The false friar turned livid as he shrunk back, crying:

"No, no! I am bad enough, but there shall be no human blood upon my soul! Besides," he added hastily as the gambler laughed contemptuously, "that would only be weaving a noose for my own throat. The suspicious rascal left word behind with whom he was going, and on what mission. If they are found dead, and the women not to be found, how could I answer?"

"What the foul fiend do you mean to do, then?" impatiently demanded John Vanderslice. "I will lose no more time. Decide, and that right quickly!"

"There is one way—it is hazardous, but I believe it can be carried out, and it offers less danger than any other plan I can think of," slowly uttered the friar.

"Spit it out, then, and be brief," growled Vanderslice.

"The money first, senor," quietly but firmly uttered Fra Serapio. "You remember the terms of our bargain. I have performed mine to the very letter. The women are here, placed alive and uninjured in your hands. The less we are seen together after this night's work, the safer it will be for us both."

John Vanderslice hesitated for a moment, but the pause was hardly perceptible. Then he drew out a well-filled wallet, and extracting therefrom ten Bank of England notes, each for one hundred pounds, handed them to the decoy.

"That squares the account between us, I believe?"

"Five thousand dollars—yes, senor, unless, indeed, you choose to remember these awkward scratches, received in your service," and as he spoke Fra Serapio gently touched first his face and then his arm.

"Such little accidents were included in the original bargain, my dear sir," was the cold response. "If there was no danger in carrying out the work, do you imagine I would have offered such a princely reward?"

"A man stands but a poor show of ever getting rich, senor, if he be too modest to ask for what he wants," laughed the unabashed rascal.

"Enough on that score. Your plan—and be brief."

"Just this. You will bind me hand and foot, and gag me. Serve Manuel Sepulveda and his son the same, only add a tap on the head, sufficient to draw blood, but not to kill them. You will leave us here in the main trail, and someone will find us in good time. But to make sure, bind my hands so loosely that I can free myself, in case no one comes to our assistance before these hogs recover their senses. I will then work myself free, and set them at liberty. Surely they cannot doubt me after that?"

John Vanderslice laughed maliciously as he touched the bloodstained bandage on the friar's face.

"And those? Would they not think it queer that we had first bandaged up the wounds in—"

slitted during your heroic defense of the ladies in your charge?"

Fra Serapio muttered a sullen curse as he gingerly removed the bandages and cast them into the fire. But his face grew lighter as he found that the flow of blood had almost entirely ceased.

Selecting as comfortable a spot as he could find, he lay down and submitted to be bound. Before adjusting the gag, John Vanderslice said, with a sneering smile:

"One more weak spot in the evidence, Fra Serapio! How about the drugged brandy? How will you account for that?"

"Lie out of it some way, never fear," laughed the decoy. "Manuel Sepulveda handed me the flask himself."

His speech was cut short by the gambler, who thrust the prepared gag into his mouth and tied the thongs tightly. Then he arose, and there was a malignant smile upon his lips that caused Fra Serapio to shudder, he scarce knew why.

"My dear friend," softly uttered the gambler, "you have had your own way in everything, but I greatly fear that you will be unable to make those hogs believe your story, so—"

With a swift motion he thrust the muzzle of a revolver against the friar's temple, and pulled the trigger!

CHAPTER X.

OUT OF THE FIRE INTO THE WATER.

CARLOS MURIETA had not been deceived by his keen ear when he fancied that in the voice of the masked chief of road-agents he recognized the tones of his bitterest foe, Raymon Salcedo. It was indeed that unworthy son of a worthy sire, who halted the Sacramento coach, in accordance with the bold plan agreed upon in council with John Vanderslice and Dirty Dick.

He counted on but little, if any, trouble. Few men were bold or foolish enough to attempt a struggle where the advantages were all against them, especially when they were assured that their persons were in no danger if they acted wisely. Brave and high-spirited as he knew the Murieta brothers to be, he felt confident that they would quietly submit with the rest, particularly as they could not for a moment suspect the truth, since his disguise was a thorough one. Unfortunately for the complete success of his plans, Raymon Salcedo spoke the second time in his natural voice, and the keen ear of hatred recognized it.

Then came the hasty dash on the opposite side of the coach, and he believed Joaquin, the first to emerge, was Carlos. He leveled his revolver, but the young Sonorian was too quick for him, and a wild, unearthly scream burst from his lips as the avenging bullet struck him, for it seemed as though full one-half of his face was shot away!

It was in Dirty Dick's arms that he was caught just in time to prevent his plunging headlong from his ambush, and the same person who urged the road-agents on to avenge the supposed death of their chief, his beloved master.

But Raymon Salcedo had not yet reached the end of his earthly trail, and as Dirty Dick bent over him, half sobbing, wholly cursing, they both made a delightful discovery.

"Glory to the ram, boss!" ejaculated Dirty Dick, as he wiped the streaming blood from the young Californian's face and for the first time realized the nature of the wound. "Tain't so bad as it might be, by a big heap! The lead glanced from the bone, I judge. A hole through the cheek is 'bout all. Cheer up, an' never say die!"

Whether it was this assurance lent him strength, or because the benumbing shock of the bullet lacerating his right cheek and glancing aside as it struck the bone was wearing off, certain it is that Raymon Salcedo staggered to his feet and stared furiously around him.

By some means, none of the outlaws could ever explain just how it was accomplished, the three lasses had been cut amid the wild confusion which followed the fall of their leader, and now the stage, with its load of frightened passengers, went dashing rapidly away, the four horses stretching out in full gallop beneath the swiftly applied lash.

"Never mind them!" shouted Salcedo, as several of his men sent hasty and poorly-aimed shots after the leaping, bouncing vehicle. "Where are the two men who leaped out and shot me?"

"Over the bank yonder, dead an' riddled with lead, I reckon, boss, from the way they tumbled," volunteered one of the party, a short, squat-built ruffian, with flowing red hair.

"After them—dead or alive they must not escape me now!"

It was the voice of a madman, and Raymon Salcedo would have rushed to the gap in the narrow fringe of bushes made by the passage of his hated foes, had not Dirty Dick forcibly restrained him.

"It ain't a wise boss that hires men to do his work, an' then does the heftiest part on it his own self. See!" he cried, as the outlaws who had rushed to the edge of the canyon opened up a rapid firing upon something below. "That

settles thar goose, I reckon, even ef they wasn't dead afore."

Raymon Salcedo twisted himself free and hurried down the bank, but Dirty Dick had accomplished his ends. The young Californian was rapidly regaining his wonted coolness.

"Are they dead or alive?" he demanded, as he reached the spot where his men were still sending bullet after bullet through the thin clump of bushes behind which Carlos Murieta had carried his senseless brother.

"Too dead to kick, *senor capitán*," respectfully observed a tall, finely-formed man, removing the mask from his face as he spoke. "One was dead when we looked over, and as the other was bearing him away, we fired. Both fell, behind those bushes, riddled through and through."

"I ain't so durned sura o' that," grunted the red-haired ruffian, uncovering his whisky-bloated and pimply face. "He tuck to kiver too close, an' hain't showed so much as a leg since."

"I can swear that I sent my first bullet through his brain," positively declared the Mexican. "I saw the blood spurt out as I pulled the trigger. When he went down behind those bushes he was a dead man—I take my oath to that!"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," was the dogged retort. "Anyway, I'd a heap ruther it was you than me that made the ventur' down thar to find out whar your lead struck."

This was a turn the Mexican had not anticipated, and for a moment he hesitated with his reply; but then, as he saw all eyes turned curiously upon him, he boldly uttered the words that roused Carlos Murieta from the stupor of grief in which he was bending over what he believed to be the corpse of his dearly beloved younger brother.

"Bah! the devils are both dead, riddled by our bullets! Stand aside—I will lead the way. Those who are not cowards will follow after, to help drag the carrion up the cliff!"

Dirty Dick, who was watching his master very closely, seeing that he was about to claim the right to first view the bodies of his fallen foemen, grasped him firmly by the arm, saying:

"Come—you're bleedin' like a stuck hog, an' ef it ain't stopped mighty soon, you'll find yourself as weak as a gal who's jumped a full-grown mouse!"

"Wait—I must see—"

"So you kin when they haul the karkidges up. You've lost too much blood fer to be runnin' up an' down a rope like that. Come, don't be foolish an' bull-headed now. Let me patch you up a bit, do!"

Raymon Salcedo yielded to the coaxing of his faithful henchman, for now that he was assured both the brothers were dead, his excitement was calming, and he began to feel weak and faint from the excessive loss of blood.

Dirty Dick led his master away to a safe distance from the canyon, and though nothing of this was allowed to show itself in his face, in his heart he was singing a song of thankfulness. Though he had spoken in such an off-handed manner, seeming to accept the death of the Murieta brothers as a settled fact, he was far from sure that such was the actual state of affairs. Dead men rarely stow away their persons in such slight cover so perfectly. He believed that one, at least, of the men was alive, though he might be wounded. If such was the case there might be strength sufficient remaining to deal one more blow for vengeance. For this reason he was resolved to prevent Raymon Salcedo from being the one to solve the uncertainty.

The solution came right rapidly, as the reader is already aware. Two men reeled away from the verge of the canyon, one screaming with agony as he clasped his terribly shattered jaw with both hands, the other to topple over upon the blood-stained gravel, dying without moan or groan.

For a dead man, Carlos Murieta was doing exceedingly well!

Raymon Salcedo leaped to his feet with a furious oath, and would have rushed to the spot from whence his bewildered fellows were shrinking away, only for the powerful grasp which Dirty Dick threw around him, pinning both arms to his body.

"No you don't, boss!" he muttered, foiling the desperate efforts of the young Californian to break away. "Let them critters do the job they're paid fer puttin' through."

"Curse you, Dirty Dick, let me go!" raged Salcedo.

"Cusses can't faze my thick hide, boss—"

"But a knife point or a bullet can! Release me, or I swear I will cut your black heart out and thrust it still quivering down your throat!" screamed the maddened man.

"Ye kin do that, an' I'll never lift a hand to hinder ye, boss," quietly added Dirty Dick. "You're crazy-mad now, an' won't hear to reason. Only fer that, I'd let ye go, fer when your nerves is cool an' stiddy, I ain't afeard of any one or two men gittin' the best o' ye. But now—sence you've struck the trail o' them two cussed devils down yender, you hain't bin your-

self.' Pears like you've got a charm putt onto ye. You won't take to kiver an' fight like a sensible man, but you jist runs out in the open an' hollers fer them to plug ye from the kiver they're squattin' under."

One more furious attempt Raymon Salcedo made to break away from the iron muscles that encircled him, then, overpowered by his mad rage, and weakened by the loss blood, his strained muscles relaxed, and he sunk a limp and lifeless weight upon the arms of his faithful follower.

"I hate to act ag'inst ye, boy—I do so!" muttered Dirty Dick as—strange, incredible sight!—hot tears dimmed his eyes. "I'd ruther chop off all two both o' my hands then to raise 'em ag'inst you, but it's all fer your own good. You hate me now—you cuss me down deep in your heart, even when your lips don't say nothin'—but the time'll come when you'll fer-give old Dick. It's all fer you he's actin' so, boy—all fer your own good, not his own pleasure, the Lord knows!"

How much of this broken, almost incoherent speech Raymon Salcedo understood as he lay limply across Dirty Dick's lap, cannot be decided here. Enough that a faint smile flickered around his pale lips, as Dirty Dick moistened them and bathed his temples with strong liquor from his flask.

Neither of the two men heard or heeded the three shots that followed each other at brief intervals below, but the white-faced, awe-stricken outlaws were not so obtuse, and as they heard the sickening *thuds* which followed the first and last shots, they shudderingly interchanged glances which asked if those two men were not something more than mortals like themselves.

It was not many minutes before Raymon Salcedo recovered his strength sufficiently to speak, and Dirty Dick brightened up wonderfully as he saw that his loved young master was more like his usual self than at any time since he had struck the trail of Carlos Murieta in San Francisco.

"Find out what has been done, and just how the situation stands, Dick. Be quick, and report."

Dirty Dick lost little time, and had need to ask few questions. Three men dead, one badly wounded, if not wholly disabled, while one, at least, of the enemy was an exceedingly live man. Such was the report, and Raymon Salcedo frowned blackly.

"You must take the job in hand, Dick," he said, finally. "These wretched bunglers are no good against such men. Go and see what you can learn."

Dirty Dick stood still, doubtfully rubbing his stubbly beard. Raymon Salcedo smiled faintly as he read this hesitation aright.

"Never fear for my prudence, father Dick. You have read me a lesson that will last me through this job, at least. I believe I was mad—under a charm, as you said."

"An' you ain't mad!" lushly asked this strange being, so hard and repulsive in every other trait save the great love he bore for the wayward young man. "You ain't layin' it up ag'inst me, what I did all fer your own good, boy?"

"Instead, I thank you, father Dick. Only for you, I would be where Diego is—dead! Not that I am so fond of life," he added, with a short, hard laugh, "but I would not like to be killed by his hand, or die without first sending his soul to explore the dark trail before me. Bring me his scalp, Dick, and I will not only forgive, but forget!"

"You shall hev it, or he shall take mine," simply uttered the old trapper, then turned and glided rapidly away down the road.

With the keen eye of a practiced scout, Dirty Dick had taken in the entire situation. Though he had not yet glanced over into the canyon, he knew pretty nearly where the enemy whose scalp he had sworn to raise was lying under cover, and he hoped to bring him under his unerring rifle from the bend of the cliff below.

Slowly and cautiously he wormed his way through the bushes and brambles that fringed the edge of the canyon wall, then peered keenly out from his ambush. A frown of disappointment wrinkled his brows as he failed to discover the victim he hoped to command from thence. Only the two dead and motionless bodies of the outlaws, whom Carlos Murieta had shot while clinging to the lasso, were visible. But in a very brief space Dirty Dick settled upon the spot where he felt assured the enemy were lying in hiding.

For several minutes he maintained his gaze, but then the black frown which deeply corrugated his brows faded away, and a shrewd smile gradually took its place.

"It kin be did, I reckon," he muttered, barely above his breath, as his keen eye roved slowly from the cover up the canyon wall. "Thar's the spot—I've got it worked dead; an' now I'll skin out to let the boss know what I've discovered."

Sliding backward as silent as a serpent, when at a certain distance from the escarpment, Dirty Dick arose and hastened back to where Raymon Salcedo was anxiously waiting his coming.

"Well?" the young Californian impatiently demanded.

"Ef it ain't jist well now, 'twill be afore long, I reckon," was the easy response. "I've got the p'izen critters spotted, though I couldn't sign 'em nor ha'r of 'em—"

"We knew where they were, well enough, before," impatiently interrupted Raymon Salcedo.

"But you didn't know how to git 'em out o' thar, 'cept by the way Big Diego tried—an' I don't reckon thar's many men here as hankers overly much to try *that* on ag'in," laughed the scout; but he added hastily, as he saw the Californian frowning:

"I want the man among ye who kin send a bullet straightest home to a movin' target the business of a man—"

"That is me," quickly interrupted Salcedo.

Dirty Dick hesitated, but it was only for a moment. He knew that the Californian was a superb shot, and that there would not be a great deal of risk attending his part of the scheme he had formed. But, to make sure, he added:

"Agreed—pervidin' you sw'ar to foller orders right through."

"Go on. I promise," was the terse reply.

"Good enough! I never knowed you to go back on your word, an' I don't reckon you will this time. You will creep up the bank thar, 'bout thirty yards, then make a openin' big enough fer ye to see to shoot through. Course ye want to be keerful them p'izen imps down yender don't smoke what you're 'bout."

"I'm neither a child nor an idiot. Go on," sharply.

"I'll go back the way I came. The rest o' you'll give us plenty o' time to git fixed up all right, then you'll gether up some o' these dornicks an' pitch 'em over the bank—not roll 'em, mind, but pitch 'em so they'll come straight down onto the kiver them critters is lurkin' under. Thar's the mark to guide ye—the top o' that manzanita bush is in a straight line with 'em, an' some thirty feet furdur out."

Raymon Salcedo laughed malignantly as he comprehended the cunning scheme. Driven out from their cover—as they must be, sooner or later—by the shower of stones, the enemy could be picked off by himself and Dirty Dick.

"Your head is worth more than all of ours lumped together, father Dick!" he cried, exultantly, for success seemed now assured beyond a doubt. "Hurry—to your post! I am impatient for the glorious moment to come when I shall see that cursed dog, Carlos Murieta, go down in death before my aim!" and, looking to his revolvers, he stole away.

Dirty Dick hastened back to his post, while the other men collected a quantity of stones, large and small, laughing and jesting, feeling much as boys do when pelting frogs or birds.

As before, Dirty Dick could catch no glimpse of the enemy, but he did not allow this fact to trouble him, for he felt well assured that they could not have fled without having been discovered by some one of the road-agents, and he knew that it would only be a matter of moments when they should be driven out from their cover by the storm of stones.

Thrusting his rifle through an opening, he raised the hammer, then quietly awaited the time for action.

This was not long delayed. The red-haired ruffian, bearing a stone that would weigh nearly a hundred pounds in his brawny hands, crept close to the edge of the canyon, and peering under the manzanita bush, correctly located the hiding-place of the Murieta brothers, then hurled the stone down.

His aim was true—and a fortunate glimpse of this was why Joaquin Murieta leaped upon his brother and hurled him so violently aside, as detailed some pages back.

Both Dirty Dick and Raymon Salcedo noted the bold deed, and as the brothers were now fully exposed to their view, they each felt that the end had come at last, as they covered their men and drew trigger.

But there was only one report. The cap on Dirty Dick's rifle failed to explode, and his oath of chagrin was echoed back by a still fiercer curse from Raymon Salcedo, who saw that his bullet had missed its mark.

The next instant Joaquin and Carlos, now fully comprehending the double danger which threatened them, were lying closely beneath the narrow ledge of rock once more.

"More stones!" cried Salcedo, furious with rage and disappointment. "Drive them out from cover, or else crush them as they lie, like rats in their hole!"

Willingly enough the road-agents obeyed. It was just fun to them, for they knew that they themselves were running no risk. So long as Dirty Dick and Salcedo were on guard, the enemy could not venture to expose themselves long enough for a shot at their tormentors on the bank above. And so, in swift succession the stones came down, falling all about the little ledge, some striking fairly upon it, sending dirt and stone dust sprinkling over the brothers, and telling them that a few more such shocks must cause the ledge to crumble away and leave them exposed to the aim of their merciless foes.

Yet not a sound broke from them that could reach the ears of their enemies. Clearly they were resolved to die, if die they must, like brave men.

Swiftly the shower of stones continued to fall, until the supply first gathered was exhausted, and the perspiring road-agents were obliged to collect more. Raymon Salcedo urged them to make haste, when his cries were suddenly cut short by a short plunge into the waters below. Whirling around, he barely caught a glimpse of a man's feet as they vanished beneath the swirling waters.

"Look out!" yelled Dirty Dick, excitedly. "They're takin' to the drink! Yender he comes up, now!"

His words were blended with the report of his rifle as he fired at the head of a man just visible above the boiling waters.

A wild cry arose above the sullen roaring—a cry that seemed of bitter agony and utter despair blended together—then the head sunk down beneath the surface, while two hands wildly gesticulated, beating the water into foam and spray!

"Forward, all!" screamed Raymon Salcedo, as a second form darted headlong into the raging element. "Fire, curse ye! Kill the dogs! Riddle them with lead—fire!"

For one instant the two struggling wretches were visible, and a hissing storm of bullets tore up the waters round about them—then, clasped in each other's arms, both men sunk from sight.

But the swirling waters, the eddying foam and dancing bubbles were now tinged with human blood!

CHAPTER XI.

WATCHING FOR THEIR PREY.

A LOUD yell of devilish triumph burst from the lips of Raymon Salcedo as he saw the forms of the Murieta brothers sink beneath the swirling waters, and noted the blood tinge that marked the spot where they had vanished. He felt that they were dead, believed that his vow of revenge, so far as it related to Carlos Murieta in person, was at last accomplished to the very letter. Still, he wished to make assurance doubly sure, and he shouted aloud as he ran swiftly down the canyon bank:

"Ben Hardy will remain on guard here with Dirty Dick—the rest of you follow me down to the mouth of the gorge!"

His purpose was readily divined. Only a few hundred yards below where the canyon made its abrupt bend in its course, the gorge came to an end, allowing the pent-up water to spread out to double its width where the unfortunate brothers had made their last despairing stroke for liberty. And here, where the river flowed more smoothly, Raymon Salcedo hoped to discover the bodies of his hated enemies as they were washed out of the gulch.

No longer feeling the effects of his wounds, the young Californian dashed along at a break-neck pace, having only one fear—that the swiftly hurrying waters might sweep the carcasses away beyond his reach ere he could gain the mouth of the gorge.

Panting and breathless with the haste he had shown, Raymon Salcedo burst through the bushes and paused on the brink of the swiftly flowing river, his keen eyes roving greedily over the gleaming surface before him, but in vain. Nothing that bore the slightest semblance to a human form was visible, and feeling assured that he had reached the spot in ample time to intercept the "floaters," he turned his gaze up-stream, a moment later to utter a yell of exultation that was almost Satanic in its ferocity.

"Yonder they come! Ready, men—fifty dollars to the man who brings the carrion ashore!" he howled rather than said, dancing madly up and down as he pointed to where a dark object was whirling and tossing in the swirling water, only a few yards within the mouth of the gorge.

Eagerly the men pressed forward, dropping their weapons and casting aside their entire garments, for the reward was a princely one for so simple a matter as a plunge into the water here, where there was no outcropping rocks to bar its smoothly flowing course; but there was no need for such haste. The dark object was whirling round and round in an eddy where the waters were divided by a huge mass of rock near the middle of the gorge. One moment visible through the boiling, tossing spume, the next instant dragged down beneath the surface, only to shoot up again in another portion of the swiftly circling eddy—surely it was the body of a man, the battered corse of one of the Murietas!

Minute after minute passed, and still that dark shape whirled and tossed in the eddy beneath the water-beaten rock, and Ramon Salcedo, from dancing in diabolical glee, began to curse and fume. Was he to be cheated out of this crowning triumph of his revenge—be debarred from spitting upon and defiling the corpse of his hated enemy?

"One hundred dollars to the man who brings me yonder body!" he cried, but there came no cheer to this offer.

The men shrugged their shoulders, as they in-

terchanged meaning glances. They were not driven beside themselves—they could see that this was a very different affair from taking a plunge into the water here, where it flowed swiftly enough, but without treachery. No mortal being could enter that frightful whirlpool and hope to emerge with life.

Raymon Salcedo read their thoughts in their faces, and hurled fierce curses at them for craven dogs.

"Not even a fish could enter that whirlpool, and come out alive—much less a man, captain," respectfully but firmly returned one of the road-agents. "Anything in reason we are ready to obey—"

"Anything that does not contain a trace of danger to your precious carcasses, you mean!" snarled the angry chief. "Bah! cowardly hounds! I'll show you what a man can dare and do!"

Casting aside his weapons, so that he might have the untrammelled use of his hands in the perilous venture, Raymon Salcedo clambered over the thick-lying rocks along the water's edge, more than once narrowly escaping being cast into the torrent by a slipping foot, but as often saving himself by a display of strength and activity truly wonderful in one who had suffered such an exhausting loss of blood. But just now the young Californian was endowed with factitious powers. His wound was forgotten. He had thoughts only for what he believed was the corpse of the rival he hated so intensely. Until that lay beneath his insulting foot, he would not be satisfied—would not feel certain that perfect success had at length capped his many disastrous failures.

After a desperate struggle, Raymon Salcedo reached a point opposite the whirling eddy, and his men who had breathlessly watched his hazardous progress, uttered a loud cry of united warning as they believed the young man was about to plunge into the swirling waters. But instead—a shrill scream that was absolutely horrible in its intensity, burst from the lips of Raymon Salcedo—he flung up his arms and reeling back, sunk down against the spray-dampened rock in a nerveless, lifeless heap!

Consternation seized upon the road agents as they witnessed the fall of their young chief. There was no human form visible near him—they had heard no shot—and yet Raymon Salcedo had fallen like one smitten by death!

"See!" ejaculated a grizzled ruffian, pointing out a dark object that was rapidly drifting past their position, barely visible now and then above the foam-topped waters. "The body has broken away from the eddy—"

The end of his sentence was not listened to, for as with one accord his mates plunged headlong into the water, each bent on being the first to reach the ghastly float and hence have the greatest claim on the reward their chief had offered. But disappointment awaited them, one and all. A yell of angry wonder burst from the foremost swimmer as he gained the object and grasped it in his brawny hands.

The supposed corpse was but a battered chunk of wood!

Sullenly they struggled back to the shore, wringing the superfluous water from their hair, beard and clothes as they cursed in chorus. They were rejoined by the veteran rascal who alone had not taken the plunge, thanks to his ignorance of the art of swimming. His face was livid, a look of superstitious awe filled his eyes and caused his voice to tremble.

"We have been fighting demons, not mortal beings! The foul fiend changed that body into a chunk of driftwood, just as you were about to clutch it. Let us go—if we linger here, we are doomed to worse than death!"

Fortunately for Raymon Salcedo, all were not equally superstitious, and one at least of the number was faithful to his young chief. Darting back to where their weapons had been flung, he cocked a pair of revolvers, and standing over the pile of arms, he sternly cried:

"The first man who dares to speak of deserting our chief, dies like a dog! One and all, swear by the blessed Virgin that you will remain faithful to him—that you will aid in rescuing him from where he now lies, and obey such orders as he may give us—or I will open fire! Swear!"

One and all knew the man well—knew that he held their lives at his finger-ends, and knew, too, that he would surely put his stern threat into execution unless they promptly took the oath he prescribed.

Several among their number were equally faithful, though not so prompt in action, and as they crossed their thumbs and kissed them, their example was followed by the remainder of the party, not even the superstitious old rascal refusing.

"Now you are men again!" cried the bold fellow, lowering his weapons, knowing well that the oath thus taken would not be broken. "Come—let us rescue the captain. Should he make a false step, he would be cast into the water and torn to pieces in that ugly whirlpool. Come!"

There was no lack of volunteers now, and in a few moments more, Raymon Salcedo was reached. He was conscious, and smiled faintly

as they came up, but that terrible passion had left him weak and unnerved.

"We were fooled," he muttered. "It was a log—I saw that as soon as I reached this spot. The waters never give up any dead—or else the current swept them past before we got down here."

A liberal drink of brandy soon restored his strength sufficiently for him to stand erect, and preparations were at once made for removing him from his precarious situation on the slippery rocks. Several sashes were tied together, and the middle one fastened securely around his body below his arms. The ends were bound about the waists of two stout men and then the dangerous journey was begun. Their progress was slow but sure, and at the end of a quarter of an hour, the young Californian reached the spot he had so madly left.

"Send for Dirty Dick," he said, sinking down upon the stones. "If he has discovered nothing of the bodies by this time, there is little use in remaining there longer."

A messenger immediately darted away, returning in a few minutes, accompanied by Dirty Dick and Ben Hardy.

"Never ketched a glimpse o' either, dead or alive," promptly uttered the old scout, in answer to the inquiring look of his master. "They never riz ag'in, after we shot. The blood showed plain enough that they was hit, an' hit hard, too, but that wasn't much needed, I don't reckon. The two-legged men never lived as could make the rifle through such a b'ilin' pot as that, let alone them as hed a heap sight more holes into 'em then natur' ever made. No, boss; them p'izen imps is beyond ever givin' of ye trouble ag'in."

"True, it does not seem possible that they could have escaped with life, and we on the look-out all the time," thoughtfully observed Raymon Salcedo. "Yet he has foiled me so often—has escaped to laugh me to scorn, when his death seemed inevitable—that I can never rest easy until I have touched his corpse!"

"You're bossin' the job, an' ef you say so, we'll wait here an' watch fer the karkidges, though it's my 'pinion that they're a good many miles below us by this, rollin' along to feed the fishes, unless they run aground on some sandbar, whar the turkey buzzards an' crows'll bury 'em, safe enough."

"Either that, or else caught among the rocks on the bottom," suggested the man who had rallied his superstitious fellows. "If that is the case, it will be days before the gas causes them to float."

These arguments decided the wavering mind of the young Californian, and his troubled brow cleared up.

"They must be dead—no merely mortal men could have escaped both lead and water, in such a mysterious manner. Some one of us would have seen them. No, they *are* dead!"

"Deader'n a tumble-bug onder a loaded wagon-wheel!" graphically observed Dirty Dick.

"It may be dangerous our lingering here much longer. The stage got clear and the news of our exploits will spread like wildfire. Some of these reckless American devils may take it into their heads to investigate the matter. We will take the saddle at once, and break our trail while there is daylight enough to do the job thoroughly."

"But you ain't fit fer a long an' hard ride now, boss," said Dirty Dick, anxiously. "That's a p'izen ugly hurt you got thar, an' ridin' in the night air won't make it any better. Let the boys go—I kin take you by a short cut to whar you can lay snug enough ontel all danger's over—"

The young Californian laughed pleasantly as he rose to his feet and stretched himself.

"I am all right, now that I feel sure those cursed hounds are put out of my path forever. It was the strength of my hatred that made me so weak!" and he laughed once more at the odd sound of the expression which, seemingly so contradictory, was nevertheless the exact truth.

If Dirty Dick was not wholly satisfied, he was too wise to attempt any further remonstrance, but quietly assumed the duty of making the ride as light as possible to his wounded master.

When the horses were brought around to the lower end of the canyon, Raymon Salcedo singled out Ben Hardy, saying:

"I promised to send Senor John Vanderslice word of how my venture resulted, and you must bear the message, my friend. You know how to find the rendezvous—the lone cabin I pointed out to you all as we rode hither. If he is not there when you arrive, linger somewhere near until he comes. Then tell him exactly what has happened. Tell him that I must visit Sacramento, but that my return will be speedy. Say also that as I have performed my share of the contract, so I expect he will prove successful in his part. You may add, too, by way of warning, that if he flinches, or tries to play me false, I will call upon him for a final settlement when he is least prepared for one. Go—ride hard, and as you perform your duty well, so you will be rewarded!"

The red-haired ruffian nodded knowingly, then rode up the hill and set off along the back trail at full speed.

"As for the rest of you, comrades," added Raymon Salcedo, drawing a check-book from his breast and writing rapidly as he spoke, "you have nobly performed the service for which I enlisted you. For the present, there is no more work for you to do, and as the surest method of baffling all pursuit which may be made, though I hardly anticipate any, we will separate here. These drafts will be honored by my major-domo, on presentation to him at my house. Those who have unfortunately fallen in my service, will not be forgotten. I will liberally recompense their families."

As he called their names, each man approached and received his pay, then fell back. One proposed a cheer for their young chief, but Salcedo quickly vetoed the demonstration.

"I can believe in your sincerity without that, and the noise might reach the ears of those whose attention we can better dispense with. One word at parting, though I hardly think the warning is necessary. Keep our work of this day sacredly a secret. The man whose unlucky tongue wags too freely, will not live many days! You comprehend my meaning?"

There was little fear but what they did, emphasized as his words were by a dark smile and a significant tapping of one finger against the butt of his revolver.

A wave of his hand was the signal for separation.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the long and hard ride to Sacramento. Enough that Raymon Salcedo and Dirty Dick reached that bustling town in due time. The young Californian succeeded in having his wound properly dressed without any suspicions being aroused as to the manner in which he had received it, though the bold attack on the stage was still the principal topic of street talk.

About noon of the second day following the halting of the stage, Raymon Salcedo was strolling through the town, when he was met by Dirty Dick, whose eyes were ablaze with strong excitement, as he grasped the young Californian by the arm.

"All h—l is to pay, boss!" he grated, in a husky whisper. "Le's skin out o' here, quick as the devil'll let us!" and he fairly forced the wondering Californian back to their lodging.

CHAPTER XII.

A DASTARDLY VILLAIN.

So swiftly was the dastardly deed accomplished that no one, not even the doomed friar, save John Vanderslice, even suspected the impending tragedy until all was over. A sharp explosion, a convulsive start and spasmodic quiver of the decoy, whose horribly shattered skull now presented a ghastly, sickening sight—then the murderer arose to his feet, holding the bank-notes in his left hand as he turned and faced his three followers.

"Dead men tell no tales!" he said, with a cold, unfeeling laugh, as he encountered their wondering, stupefied looks. "Fra Serapio meant well enough when he was strictly sober, but he swung too free a tongue whenever he drank—which was just as often as he could buy, beg or steal anything stronger than water. Our secret would have leaked out through him before a week passed over our heads, and somebody *might* take it up as their quarrel."

This speech was considerably longer than John Vanderslice intended to make when he began, but as he spoke he could not help seeing the faces of his comrades grow dark and darker, while dangerous glances passed between them.

Not that they had any especial love or even fellowship for the hapless decoy who lay there forever stilled in the relentless grasp of death. It was each one of himself that they were thinking. Were they, too, to be rewarded after a similar fashion when their work was done—discharged with bullets of lead where they had been promised coins of gold?

John Vanderslice was keen-witted and quick enough when his own welfare was involved, and he read the dark lines impressed upon their faces almost as easily as though the sentiments had been expressed in plain words. Smoothly he continued speaking, just as though what he now uttered had been in his mind from the first.

"There was only one way to insure our safety, and that course, though disagreeable enough, I have not hesitated to follow, quite as much for your good, gentlemen, as my own. Fra Serapio was the one stumbling-block. Allow me to explain, and I am sure you will see the necessity for his removal in the same light that I do."

"These ladies were left at the Mission San Francisco Dolores, in the care of Manuel Sepulveda, this man; but in charge over all is the Franciscan monk, Jesus Maria. You know what a terrible power such a man can wield, even in these days. Should he strike the right scent, we would be hunted down and shown no mercy when caught, hence I have cut the only clew that could connect us with the outrage, as he would term our innocent little ruse."

"Surely there was no need to murder the poor devil!" growled Parkhurst, who was not so utterly bad but that he could revolt from such abominable treachery.

"Would you rather kill all three?" sharply demanded John Vanderslice. "Now, these two men cannot suspect the whole truth. When they awaken, to find the monk dead, they will be thoroughly puzzled. If he were alive, no matter how smoothly he told the story he proposed, suspicion would strike home at length. It would be proved that he lied about the attack on the coach and the wounding of those two men, husbands of these two women. Dead they may be, and I believe are, long ere this, but the two accounts would differ widely. The lie about the horse which Fra Serapio claimed to have ridden to death would be exposed. Suspicion would turn upon him, he would be arrested, and, if necessary, put to the torture by the Franciscan. How long would he have proved faithful to us? At the first turn of the screws he would tell all, and we would be hunted down, no matter where we might try to hide our heads. I leave you to guess the result."

John Vanderslice paused for want of breath, and he saw that he had made the desired impression. The danger he feared was past, but to make all sure he clinched his argument by a still more telling stroke.

"Of course I could not leave those notes on the body. Such a sum, in such well-known hands, would provoke too much comment. Here—divide this between you. It is more than I promised you for your share of this night's work, but I do not care to handle money that ever belonged to a man I was forced to kill. Take it, not as wages, but as a gift, over and above the sum I agreed to give!"

All doubts and scruples were cast to the winds at this display of princely generosity. They felt no hesitation about fingering blood money, and only regretted that there were not other dangerous tools to be silenced after the same fashion!

John Vanderslice was quite as well satisfied. He felt that he could afford to pay heavily for the glorious prize he had won; and then, he felt assured that by far the greater portion of the money thus bestowed would sooner or later drift back into his own coffers, through the agency of the "Wheel of Fortune."

"Come, to horse, gentlemen!" he cried, cheerily. "Our journey is not at an end, yet, though the rendezvous cannot be many miles distant from this spot. Parkhurst, you will look after the yellow-haired beauty—but beware! Her future spouse is a very demon of jealousy, and if the lady should have occasion to whisper scandal about you, your doom is sealed!"

"Little fear," growled the ruffian. "I hate women as I hate cats! I'll sell out the job cheap, captain."

"For that very reason I chose you, man," seriously replied the gambler. "Raymon Salcedo sets a high value upon her, and would not think twice about cutting the throat of one who dared steal a kiss from her tempting lips, or gave her a clasp more warm than absolutely necessary to hold her on the saddle without falling."

John Vanderslice raised Carmela in his arms as though her weight was no more than that of an infant, and swung himself into the saddle. Parkhurst imitated the example thus set him, and then the four men rode away through the night with their captives, leaving the dead and the drugged victims of double treachery lying beside the dying fire.

At first Carmela Murieta lay in the arms of her captor like one bereft of senses. The terrible anxiety she had undergone during the long and hard ride to what she believed was the death-bed of her idolized husband, the wearing suspense when Fra Serapio was so cunningly playing his last card in his game of diabolical treachery, the soul-sickening discovery which followed the cunning of Don Manuel Camplido, and then the brutal murder—the marvel is that her poor brain did not give way entirely.

But John Vanderslice was not content to let well enough alone. He had brooded over his vow of vengeance so long, that now, when its complete fulfillment seemed assured, he could not deny himself a foretaste of the rich treat in store.

It would be a painful and even disgusting task to record his mocking, taunting words. He paid no heed to the men who rode behind him, for he knew that his liberality had bought them body and soul. Indeed, an occasional low laugh from them seemed to urge him on to further extremes.

"Before this time, the wretched cur whom you have called your husband, is dead," he tauntingly said to poor Carmela, "but do not despair. You shall not remain a disconsolate widow long—be sure of that! It may even be—ay! I swear that it *shall* be!" and his evil voice rung out in a peal of laughter that sounded like the mad glee of a drunken demon.

"Boys, what say ye? Shall we have a wedding to night? This fair lady has been my betrothed for nearly two years, and though she temporarily strayed into strange pastures giving another man the rights that properly be—"

longed to me, I am ready to condone the past and make her a good husband. Shall it be tonight?"

"Just as you say, captain," laughed Parkhurst. "But be on your guard! After the style in which they were polishing off the monk when we rode up, I'm afraid your bridal bed will contain quite as many thorns as roses. Be sure I shall never try to rival you!"

A coarse laugh greeted this speech, and then John Vanderslice turned once more to the hapless creature whom he felt shuddering in his arms.

"You hear the decision, pet? You shall have a new and better husband this very night, nearly spent as it is. When we reach the cabin, I shall perfect my triumph. I have sworn it—and so I place my seal to the vow!"

As he spoke, John Vanderslice bent his head and pressed his foul, burning mouth to Carmela's lips.

Better for him if he had confined himself to threats alone. The degrading touch of his lips wrought the poor girl to frenzy. She snatched the keen-pointed knife from his girdle and struck him with all the power she could summon!

A furious curse of mingled rage and pain broke from the ruffian as he reeled beneath the blow, and felt a burning pain in his side. And then, before he could recover from the shock, Carmela wrested herself from his unnerved grasp, and leaping to the ground, fled through the night with a speed lent by fear and despair.

"After her! fire and furies! do not let her escape!" gasped John Vanderslice, reeling in his saddle, a profusion of blood red stars dancing before his swimming eyes.

The two unincumbered men dashed past him in swift pursuit, the moment they realized what had occurred. They had for the instant lost sight of the fugitive, but then a sharp cry guided them, and leaping from his horse, the leading ruffian raised a loud cry as he grasped the poor girl.

Fate seemed against her. Fleeing in blind haste, thinking only of eluding the dastardly villain who had sworn her ruin, poor Carmela caught her foot in a trailing vine and fell headlong. Her head came in contact with the hard earth, and pain wrung that involuntary cry from her lips—then all was a merciful blank.

"Bind the young tiger-cat hand and foot, and bring her along with you," snarled John Vanderslice, riding up. I am bleeding like a stuck hog! Haste, Parkhurst—to the cabin! I fear I've got my death wound—haste!"

Parkhurst chuckled grimly as he followed the lead of his terrified chief. He had no particular love for John Vanderslice, whom he shrewdly suspected to be an arrant coward at all times when the odds were not overwhelmingly in his favor, but liberality with such hirelings, covers a multitude of sins, and for the sake of gold, he served one whom he despised. Possibly he would not have laughed now, only he felt sure, from the gambler's voice, that he was by no means so badly injured as his craven fears led him to imagine.

A very few minutes sufficed to carry them to the lonely cabin—a small structure of unhewn logs, situated upon a little level space half-way up the hillside, hidden from view of any one passing along the main road.

John Vanderslice dismounted with a hollow groan.

"Strike a light—be quick, man! Do you want me to bleed to death before your very eyes?"

Parkhurst made no audible response, but struck a match, and taking a handful of grass and leaves from the rude bunk that ranged along one side of the small room, soon started a blaze in the fire-place.

"Looks as though some one had been camping here," the ruffian suddenly exclaimed, as he noticed a small pile of bark and sticks lying near the fire-place. "Are you sure no one lives here?"

"The man who built it is dead—blew his brains out in the Wheel of Fortune," shortly replied Vanderslice, his voice sounding more natural, now that he had torn open his blood-saturated garments and saw the extent of his hurts. "Look, Parkhurst, I believe, after all, that the knife-point glanced on a rib. You can tell better than I."

Such was found to be the case, and greatly relieved, John Vanderslice glowered savagely at the now conscious Carmela, while Parkhurst chewed up and bound on a poultice of healing leaves. A hearty drink of brandy completed her restoration, and poor Carmela averted her eyes with a shudder of sickening apprehension as she saw the red, evil glow deepen again in his eyes.

"We will have that wedding, frontier fashion, after all, boys," the dastardly villain exclaimed when his wound was bandaged.

"You will have your own way, of course, captain," said Parkhurst, who had made a hasty examination of the one small room after attending to the gambler's wound. "But I believe there has been some one living here very recently—this very night, it may be! If we should be discovered or spied upon, it might not be so pleasant."

"Some wandering prospector stopped here for a meal or so, it may be, but nothing worse," was the impatient reply. "I had it from a certain source that no person has lived here for months. For that reason, I gave the rendezvous for this spot, and I, for one, mean to remain here until word comes from Salcedo."

"All right. If you are satisfied, we should be. You have by far the most at stake."

"You can watch outside, if that will make you feel any more at ease, or you can remain and witness the sport here. I am not at all squeamish," added the villain, with a brutal laugh as he stepped over to where Carmela sat, supported by the wall, her hands and feet bound.

"A wedding would hardly be legal, without witnesses, captain," laughed Parkhurst, whose brutal merriment was reinforced by that of the other men.

"Come, my beauty," and the white teeth of the gambler gleamed in the firelight like the fangs of a hungry wolf. "You heard me take that oath—this very hour shall witness the crowning triumph of the bitter black revenge I vowed—"

"Mercy—help, if you are men, not demons!" gasped poor Carmela, as John Vanderslice seized her; but the three scoundrels only laughed mockingly, and her doom seemed sealed.

At that critical moment the door was hurled violently open, and a tall form leaped upon the threshold.

CHAPTER XIII.

SURROUNDED BY DEATH.

In the mean time, what had become of the brothers, Carlos and Joaquin Murieta? That question can best be answered by going back to the point of time at which we abandoned them so abruptly.

It will be remembered that Joaquin was reluctantly yielding his opinion to that of his more sanguine brother, when he abruptly paused in his speech, leaping upon Carlos and hurling him aside with the strength of a madman. But there was reason in his madness. His keen eye had caught a glimpse of a moving shadow cast at their feet, and instinctively glancing upward, he beheld the mass of stone hurled by the brawny arms of Ben Hardy plunging swiftly down upon them. There was no time even to utter a cry of warning, and only the rapidity with which he hurled Carlos aside, saved one or both from being crushed beneath the rock.

Fortune favored them in that Dirty Dick's rifle missed fire, while Raymon Salcedo, usually a dead shot, was too eager to complete his revenge, and his bullet whistled harmlessly past the ear of his intended victim.

"To cover again, and lie close!" cried Joaquin, himself setting the example which Carlos was not slow to follow.

Crouching low down and pressing as far back under the narrow ledge of rock as was possible, the brothers interchanged gloomy looks. The heavy storm of stones which fell so thickly over and about them, could have only one ending. Sooner or later their frail shelter must be demolished—already the frost-eaten ledge was beginning to crack and crumble beneath those repeated shocks—they would be forced out into full view of the merciless enemy above, or else be bruised and battered to death as they lay.

"From bad to worse, brother!" muttered Joaquin, a sickly smile on his lips as he brushed the dirt from his face after a heavy fragment of rock struck upon the ledge, then bounded into the rushing waters before them.

"Listen!" and Carlos frowned blackly as the voice of Raymon Salcedo came to their ears, urging his men to redoubled exertions. "That imp of Satan is still alive! If I could only secure one fair stroke at him, I'd care little for the rest. But to die, knowing him alive to hunt down and persecute poor Nicholas! that is the bitterest potion!"

"It is his turn now, and we can do nothing. No doubt he has lined the bank with sharpshooters, ready to pick us off when we are driven from cover by this hail-storm—"

"Which will not be long!" ejaculated Carlos, as the ledge above their heads sent down another shower of debris. "We will be crushed like rats—unless—" and he cast a gloomy glance out over the raging, swirling waters.

"You are right, brother," smiled Joaquin, cool and composed even though surrounded by death. "There is still that alternative. Not that it affords a much greater chance for life than lying here to be crushed, but though the waters may kill, at least they will cheat that merciless hell-hound out of a portion of his triumph—he will have no chance to insult our bodies after life has fled!"

"If we assume it rightly, one may escape to avenge the other. They will not expect such a move on our part, and, thrown into confusion, will empty their weapons at the one who takes the lead. Then, if you dive deep and swim down, you may reach the rift, over yonder. Over that you are sure."

"Stop!" and Joaquin grasped his brother firmly by the arm as he was gathering himself

up to take the dangerous plunge. "I claim the right to lead the way—"

"On what grounds?" sharply demanded the elder brother. "It was through me that you were led into this trap. Raymon Salcedo has no quarrel with you, and no cause to wish your death, save that the same blood flows in my veins and yours. You are mad, brother!"

"Mad or not, grounds or no grounds, I will not let you run all the risk while I reap the benefit," doggedly retorted Joaquin. "If you persist, the moment you take the plunge I will rise up and declare myself Carlos Murieta."

Carlos hesitated, for he knew that his brother was making no idle threat. Yet with every passing moment their situation was growing more precarious. The ledge above them was already crumbling and shattered. A few more such shocks and they both would be fully exposed to the aim of their merciless foes, when death must surely follow.

Suddenly the frown upon his brow grew lighter.

"Come, brother, while I do not admit the justice of your claim, to quarrel about it now would be suicidal. I ask as a favor—perhaps the last request I shall ever make—let me go first."

"No," quietly but resolutely returned Joaquin. "Either I lead the way or we both go together."

There came a lull in the shower of rocks as he spoke, and then they heard Raymon Salcedo angrily bidding his fellows gather a fresh supply.

"We have a breathing-spell now," said Carlos, more quietly. "Since you will not yield to my rights, let us compromise. Break that twig in two—the one to whom the shortest lot falls will lead the way. Turn your back—so!"

Joaquin did as he was bidden, and Carlos at the same moment arose and plunged headlong into the raging waters!

The sudden splash—the warning cry from Dirty Dick, followed almost immediately by the report of his rifle, gave Joaquin his first intimation of how generously he had been deceived. For one moment he seemed dazed—but then, as Carlos uttered a strangled cry for help, beating the swirling waters with his hands like one in mortal agony—the spell was broken, and the young Sonorian plunged headlong to the rescue.

The impetus of his leap carried him to the side of Carlos, whom he instantly grasped with a hold that nothing short of death could loosen, but in that same instant Joaquin made the horrible discovery that had wrung that scream of terror from the lips of generous, stout-hearted Carlos Murieta.

It was not the hissing storm of lead that tore the water all about them, dashing the blinding spray into their faces, and sharply stinging them where they tore through the flesh. But some horrible, unseen monster seemed grasping their lower limbs, dragging them down to its subaqueous haunts—down to a frightful death!

In vain they struggled to release themselves from this unknown incubus—it would not be denied. Fiercer and more relentless grew that terrible grasp—and then, with gasping, gurgling cries of horror that no other peril could have wrung from their lips, the unfortunate brothers felt themselves dragged down into the watery depths by that tremendous power!

It seemed to Joaquin that his limbs were being torn from their sockets as he was pulled and hauled about, now whirling end over end, now rolling swiftly along through the swirling element—but through it all he clung to the form of his brother. Death alone should separate them!

To him it seemed an age that this frightful struggle with an unseen, unknown power lasted. There was a horrible roaring in his ears. A steadily-contracting band of red-hot iron seemed to envelop his head—his brain seemed being crushed to a jelly, oozing from his ears, his eyes, his nostrils. Then came a heavy shock—and the pent-up air rushed from his lungs in a gasping, moaning cry of utter despair.

Even in that moment of half-unconsciousness Joaquin could feel a dull sense of wonder that he was not experiencing more pain, for he believed that this was death.

The roaring was still sounding in his ears, but that terrible band seemed to burst and his brain to be set free once more. He could breathe—and it was pure air, not water that entered his lungs! That terrible, loathsome grasp was no longer fastened upon his limbs—had the water monster been beaten from its prey by some more frightful power, as yet lurking near without claiming its victims, or—

And then the glad truth burst upon the reeling brain of the young Sonorian. This was not death, though the fierce waters still roared and swirled around him—though all was dark and cold, and he knew not where he was.

Words are powerless to picture the wondrous emotions that agitated the poor fellow at that moment—joy did battle with despair, and fear with hope. Alive, yet where? Death in many shapes might be lurking near, all the more hor-

rible from being unseen. The world he had so recently left, was bright and fair—here all was blackness and horror. Was he living? Was not this death—the intermediate stage between life and total annihilation—the purgatory of which he had heard the priests prate in bygone days?

There is no telling how far his over-wrought brain might have carried him among these weird, awesome fancies, had not a swift rush of the circling waters raised the body of Carlos Murieta and almost wrested it from his grasp. A convulsive struggle—and once more Joaquin Murieta was saved, for the time being, at least if not from death, from madness!

Alone in that frightful gloom, with unknown terrors surrounding him on every side, worn and weary, faint from loss of blood, there could have been but the one ending. His brain would have failed him, and he would have gone down in the swift waters to meet his death.

But the thought that his dearly loved brother was in need of his help snatched the poor fellow back from the brink of insanity, and in struggling to save another he saved himself. And yet—could Joaquin Murieta have foreseen the black, rayless future that lay before him—have dreamed of the terrible fate that awaited his brother and his wife—all that remained on earth for him to love—he would gladly have gone down to death then, as a joyful escape from the future! But the hand of fate was in it all. The dread doom was to be fulfilled, and so he fought the fight, and won, as he believed.

Joaquin found that the waters had swept him against a mass of rock, but a few inches higher than the waters that still strove to tear him from its side. How large this haven was, or whether it was more than a tiny island in the midst of this unseen lake, he could not tell. He only knew that it afforded him a respite from death, and working his way up it, he dragged the body of his brother after him.

There was ample space for them both. Joaquin did not make any further exploration then. He had thoughts only for his brother. Was he dead?

He hardly dare ask himself the question—dare not answer it, even in his heart. And yet—he had miraculously escaped with life—had cheated the hissing lead, the raging waters, the horrors of strangulation during that awful period of suffering while being brought to this gloomy refuge. Then why not Carlos? He was living—he could not have been taken while the other was spared!

But the faint hope which Joaquin thus fanned into existence died away as he opened the clothes of his brother with trembling fingers and placed his hand over his heart. There was no perceptible throbbing. The heart seemed stilled forever.

A low moan of bitter despair broke from the lips of the young Sonorian, and his strength failed him all at once. He drooped over the motionless form of his brother, as he felt his senses leaving him. He could struggle no more. Why should he? What was there left in life for him now?

"Carmela—your wife!"

The words seemed to float to his brain from out the darkness, and Joaquin roused up with a cry of amazement. Who spoke? Surely those words came from no mortal lips! And yet—he was alone with the corpse of his brother—alone in a living tomb!

CHAPTER XIV.

A HEART OF GOLD.

"GET out of that, ye bloody thief, or I'll blow a hole through ye big enough to chuck a flour-barrel in!"

Bold words where one man confronted four well armed ruffians whose hands were well used to bloodshed, but the man who uttered them, who dashed in the door of the lone cabin and leaped upon the threshold at the pitiful cry of Carmela Murieta for mercy, was one ever ready to back up his words with deeds as prompt and emphatic.

John Vanderslice, his face and evil eyes aflame with liquor and vile passions, whirled swiftly at the stern challenge, only to find himself covered by the muzzle of one cocked six-shooter, while another similar weapon held his three comrades in evil at bay. He saw this, and more. In the big blue eyes behind the revolvers, he read *shoot* in terms that could not be mistaken, and his craven heart turned white with terror as he shrunk back from those indignantly blazing orbs.

A glad cry burst from poor Carmela's lips as she recognized the new-comer as a friend, even though they had not seen each other's faces until that moment. To her, the bold intruder seemed more than a man—an angel sent from Heaven in direct response to her wild appeal.

No man would have laughed more heartily at this wild fancy than the bluff gold-digger himself, and to other eyes he would have looked very unlike an angel indeed. Yet a more fitting champion for one in sore distress, at that time and place, could not well be found.

Not quite two inches less than six feet in height, weighing some hundred and seventy

pounds, without any waste in extra flesh or fat; broad shoulders, superbly muscled; a chest so round and full that he could swing his hands around on a straight line with his shoulders until their backs struck together behind him, at the same time standing so erect and steady that not a drop would be spilled from a cup filled to the brim with water and resting upon his head; a lithe, round waist, with thighs and lower limbs that might serve a sculptor as models of masculine strength and perfection. His head was massive, covered with curling, dark brown hair, and a heavy pair of mustaches shaded his firm-cut mouth. His large eyes were blue, with a steel-gray tinge. His cheek-bones were rather high and broad, his nose long and straight, his chin long and firm. His garb was simple, made for service rather than looks. A soft felt hat, now pushed far back from his face, a blue flannel shirt, corduroy trousers thrust into heavy horsehide boots. A belt around his waist, where gleamed the hilt of a stout knife. On each hip an empty pistol scabbard.

Such was the man who confronted the four astounded villains—not handsome, according to the ideas of most women, to the outward eye, but far better than that; he was a man from top to toe, and underneath that flannel shirt beat a heart of gold—a heart that never deceived a friend or failed a foe.

"Slow and easy, there!" cried the miner, sternly, as Parkhurst moved a hand toward the revolver that hung at his hip. "I ain't very cross-eyed, but I can see around a corner when dealing with such rascals as you! Touch a weapon, and I'll bore you through, sure as there's a God in Israel! Up with your hands, every mother's son of ye! And empty, too!"

"What right—" began John Vanderslice, only to be cut short.

"The right of a white man to respond when a woman calls for help, you black-faced thief o' the night!" was the indignant response, sharp and decisive as the crack of a revolver. "The right of a man who finds his shanty taken possession of by a parcel of scoundrels—will you have it, fool?"

The last words were blended with the sharp crack of his revolver. One of the rascals, partially hidden by the burly form of Parkhurst, thinking to draw a weapon and secure a killing shot before his purpose could be detected or foiled, uttered a wild yell of agony as a bullet crashed through his hand, shattering the knuckles and knocking the half-drawn weapon to the floor.

The miner leaped aside to clear the smoke of his shot, and there was death in every tone of his voice as he said:

"Once more—up with your hands! By the Lord above us! I will send a bullet through the brain of the one who hesitates. Up—and empty, before I can count three!"

It was one against three now, for the wounded man had all the fight knocked out of him by that one touch of this rough-and-ready fellow's snap-shot. Only three, and one of those an arrant coward whose knees were quaking and threatening to give way beneath his weight, whose wolfish teeth were rattling like the castanets of a Spanish dancer—John Vanderslice.

Swift as the command, his empty hands went up, quivering like leaves in a zephyr; and seeing this, the other men sullenly followed his example just as they would have risked a fight had their employer signified any desire to lead the way.

A short, mocking laugh fell from the lips of the miner, but not for an instant did he relax his vigilance, for he knew that he was dealing with treacherous rascals who would be dangerous did he allow them the slightest chance of success.

"Good enough! but bear in mind that I mean business. I'd hate to muss the floor of my parlor all up or to waste good powder and lead on such poor game as you, but I'll have to do both if you cut up rusty. You have your warning, and after this I'll strike first, then talk. Lower your hands an inch, or stir one of your feet, and you'll be cold meat for my private graveyard, sure!"

There was no reply from the rascals so neatly caught in their own trap. Still covering them with his pistols, the miner cautiously slid along until he could kick the door shut. Then, leaning his back against it, he glanced toward Nicholas, who had not stirred from the spot where Parkhurst placed her when the cabin was reached. Her hands were still bound, but her feet were free.

"Lady," and it was wonderful how soft and respectful that stern, ringing voice now became, "I hate to trouble you, but I fear I must ask your assistance for a bit. You are not hurt? You can walk over to where I stand?"

Until now the poor girl had seemed under a spell. She had been sorely tried during the past thirty-six hours, as the reader is aware, and the knowledge that she and Carmela had been so basely betrayed by Fra Serapio to a doom far worse than death, had completely crushed her spirit. Even now, though she rose from the rude bunk and approached the miner, in obedience to his request, she looked and moved like one in a dream.

Of this the miner was ignorant, or he might have hesitated about intrusting her with such an important duty, but he had taken but that one swift glance at her, not daring to remove his gaze from the enemy for a longer period, and even while he spoke, his eyes were upon them.

"So!" he exclaimed as Nicholas paused beside him in silence. "Turn your back toward me, so I can get at the knot. I guess these rascals will be satisfied with one hand—if not, so much the worse for their health!"

As he spoke, the miner lowered his left hand, thrusting the pistol, still cocked, into its scabbard, then fumbled at the sash that confined the girl-wife's arms behind her, never once removing his steady gaze from the rascals whom he held at bay.

Parkhurst had carried out the orders of John Vanderslice thoroughly, and working under difficulties as he was, guided by the sense of feeling alone, and with the use of but one hand, the miner found it a task of time and no little difficulty to unfasten the tightly drawn knots. But success rewarded his efforts at length, and casting aside the sash, he again drew his second revolver.

"Now, lady, if you will oblige me by taking the weapons from the belts of these sweet-scented rascals, it will save some trouble and maybe bloodshed. I will make it perfectly safe, and as easy for you as I can.

"You, ugly mug," he added, addressing Parkhurst, and emphasizing his words with the muzzle of his revolver, "take two steps this way, but keep your hands up. Don't forget that you have been warned for the last time, and that at the first crooked movement I'll shoot."

"Now, lady, just slip behind him, and with this knife—take it from the scabbard, here—cut his belt in two. Slip it off and bring it back to me. There's not the slightest danger, believe me."

In this, Parkhurst did not agree with him. There was a wild light flashing in the eyes of Nicholas as she grasped the buckhorn haft and drew the gleaming weapon from its leather sheath, that he was far from admiring, as he remembered how rudely he had handled her only a short time before. But that ugly revolver muzzle was staring him full in the eyes, and he dare not move even a finger as the woman glided behind him, though every nerve tingled and twitched as he expected to feel the knife driven deep into his back.

In this expectation he was most agreeably disappointed.

From the moment when she touched the weapon, Nicholas became herself once more, and deftly, rapidly performed the duty assigned her. As she dropped the weapon-laden belt at the feet of the miner, a pleasant smile lit up his rugged face and rendered it fairly handsome.

"Thanks, lady. Now, fellow, fall back, but remember your lesson. I'm not through with you yet, by a good deal."

One by one he forced the villains to advance so far from their fellows that there was no danger of Nicholas being caught by a sudden movement and held as a shield from cover of which a shot might be fired. One by one they were disarmed, John Vanderslice the last.

Then Nicholas hastened over to where Carmela lay, and cutting her bonds, embraced her with a flood of hysterical tears.

The miner cast one swift glance toward them, and felt that he could expect nothing more from his fair ally under the present circumstances. But he proved equal to the emergency.

"Now, awkward squad," he said, turning his attention solely to the disarmed ruffians, "keep your hands up and march forward until the cabin wall stops you. Forward! straw-foot, hay-foot, straw-foot—halt!"

Sullenly enough the four outwitted villains obeyed, for, though rather jocularly worded, the command was given to be carried out, and they dreaded the consequences of disobedience too much to think of rebelling, even for a moment. Not until it was absolutely impossible for them to move an inch closer to the wall did they pause. A ridiculous tableau they formed, standing thus with their arms extended as though seeing which could reach the highest on the wall. Though the victims themselves could hardly be expected to appreciate this phase of the situation, the miner assuredly could and did, laughing heartily as he lowered his weapon and took a leisurely survey of his captives.

"A lovely picture you make, my bully boys," he cried, mockingly. "Only one thing lacking—a big buck nigger armed with a lively black snake to write your sins in red characters on your backs, so that all men can see and read the class of society to which you rightly belong."

"You'd better kill us outright," snarled Parkhurst, fiercely, yet not daring to relax his strained attitude in the least. "I swear to bound you to the hottest flames of hell for this night's work!"

"If ever you get free, why not add, bully?" coolly retorted the sturdy miner. "A wise man knows when to keep his tongue between his teeth. I am not through with you yet, and I give you fair warning that I'll mete out your

punishment in exact accordance with the impudence you show.

"As the first step, I am going to bind your hands behind you. If you act decently, so much the better for you. If you cut up rusty, then somebody will get hurt, bad! And I'm ready to give odds that that somebody will not be me!"

The miner was not idle while he spoke thus, but pulling an old dry hide from the bunk, he passed over to where the two women were still clasped in each other's arms, and picking up the knife that Nicholasa had dropped on setting Carmela free, he proceeded to cut the skin into suitable strips for binding the rascals he had so completely out-generated.

Carmela, now more like her usual self, gently released herself from the hysterical embrace of her weaker sister-in-law, and arising, addressed the miner:

"Dear senor, some time I hope to show you how grateful I am for the great service you have rendered me, but just now my heart is too full to say much—"

"Now please don't, ma'am!" and the big-hearted fellow blushed furiously, for he was bashful as an overgrown school-boy where any of the fair sex was concerned. "It's just a pleasure to serve these rascals out—"

"I know they deserve a thousand times all they have received, and if I live long enough, one at least shall pay the full penalty of his enormous crimes, but you must not run more risk on our account than is absolutely necessary. Give me one of your pistols—I know well how to use it. Now you can bind them without fear of their attacking you, for at the first sign of insubordination, I will send a bullet home—so help me Holy Mother!"

Rarely beautiful was Carmela Murieta just then, her eyes flashing, her cheeks glowing red, as she poised the heavy revolver which seemed to turn its frowning muzzle of its own volition full upon the fear-shaken form of John Vanderslice. The gambler seemed to divine his peril by instinct, for he pressed closer to the wall, and his voice was a pitiful whine as he appealed to the miner:

"She will murder me—save me, senor! I have surrendered—I am your prisoner—do not let me be assassinated, for the love of heaven!"

A scornful laugh from the red lips he had so wantonly defiled, cut his cringing appeal short.

"Bah! cowardly dog and murderer! The death that befits a man and soldier, is not for you. Die you shall—I swear it!—but suffer beneath the hand of the common hangman!"

"There's nothing to fear from him, at all events!" laughed the miner, gathering up the stout strips of hide. "Of all cravens, there are none so basely cowardly as the one who can insult a woman when she cannot resist. Lower your hands and put them behind you, dog. Thank the devil, your master, that I am not drawing this thong around your neck, as I am strongly tempted to do!"

With a force that made the gambler wince with pain, the sturdy miner drew the rough thong together and knotted it securely. Then he grasped Vanderslice by the collar, kicked his legs from under him, letting him fall upon the rough puncheon floor with his whole weight.

"Never waste politeness on a sheep-killing cur, is one of my mottoes," grinned the gold-digger, rolling Vanderslice over on his face with a thrust of his foot. "And if you have no sneaking fondness for other men's mutton, then your ugly mug must villainously slanders you! So! you'll never find a snigger fit than that, until Jack Ketch rigs you out in his patent cravat!"

The wounded man was bound next, and handled more carefully, thanks to the severe punishment he had already received. Neither he nor his fellow offered any resistance, but Parkhurst, whose position chanced to make him last, and who was wrought up to desperation by the mocking speeches of the stout miner, resolved to escape or die.

He knew that Carmela had him covered with a revolver, but he calculated on foiling her by the suddenness of his movements, and when he was ordered to lower his hands, he whirled swiftly around and grappled with the miner. But he reckoned without his host in this instance.

A sharp report rung out from the weapon held by Carmela, but the miner believed she had missed her aim as he felt the fierce grasp of the desperate ruffian. A short, fierce laugh broke from his lips as his powerful arms twined themselves about his adversary, for never yet had he met his equal in a close hug like this. One enormous effort, then the heavy form of Parkhurst was lifted clear off the floor and whirled over the miner's shoulder, striking head-first upon the floor at the further end of the room.

Swift as a panther the gold-hunter whirled around and leaped after the fallen man; but Parkhurst made no effort to regain his feet.

"He was doubly warned, by you as well as me," cried Carmela, with a sternness that sounded strange and unnatural coming from the lips of a young and beautiful woman. "If he rebelled, he knew what to expect, and his blood tests upon his own head!"

There was a grave, even sad look upon the face of the miner as he stood erect once more. A bullet had pierced the brain of the luckless wretch who lay there, but it was not regret for the fate that had so suddenly cut short his evil career that clouded the frank brow of the honest miner. But to him it seemed almost a sin that the blood of even such a wretch as this should stain so fair a hand, and that instant witnessed a change in the vague fancies that were beginning to take shape in his big heart. Perhaps it was best for him that this tragedy had occurred.

"You are angry with me?" and a little hand rested lightly upon his strong arm.

"No—not angry," he muttered, "why should I be? What right have I to feel angry at such as you? Only sorry that you should have shot him—it is a little hard to take human life—too little and fair to be soiled with blood!"

"And I am glad!" cried Carmela, her eyes flashing, her cheeks aglow. "I could laugh with a fierce joy as I saw them fall one by one before my deadly aim! I could joy to see the red blood drained from their black hearts, and I could even mock their dying groans! Oh! if you only knew what I and mine have suffered from these wretches and their comrades in evil, you would not wonder that I am changed from a woman into a relentless tigress!"

"You must have had terrible provocation!" uttered the miner, his voice growing softer. "Some day I hope to hear all, but not now. The night is nearly spent, and this wild spot is no fitting refuge for such as you. Are you strong enough to ride back to where these devils left your friends?"

"You know, then—" began Carmela, only to be cut short.

"Enough to understand the general drift of the case, yes. I was out to-night—for this is my present home—after a bear which I had marked to his den, when I heard the pistol-shot that killed the man who betrayed you to these wretches. I crept near enough to see all, and hear something. I would have tried to free you then, but for learning that your captors meant to stop here, so I bided my time, following them closely—you know the rest."

"Some day—not now—I will try to thank you as you deserve. Then, maybe, when you have heard my story in all its details, you will not think so hardly of me, as now, for killing that villain yonder. I did not know what a giant you was—I feared that, taken by surprise, you would have been slain in our defense."

"I do not blame you—I only wish his blood was on my hands instead of yours. But time presses, and delay may be fatal to your poisoned friends. I will bring up the horses."

This was not the only reason the honest miner was in such haste to cut short those soft, pleading tones. He knew that Carmela was a wedded wife, from what he had contrived to overhear before interfering in her behalf, and the strange emotions that were stirring his heart so powerfully, warned him of a danger more imminent than the one he had just escaped.

Quickly he brought the horses formerly ridden by John Vanderslice and his gang to the door, and silently assisted the two women to mount. But then Carmela spoke:

"Those villains in there—you surely will not suffer them to go free? One at least must be delivered up to justice—"

"It shall be as you say, lady," was the reply. "They are safe enough here for the present, and as soon as I have seen you safe with your friends, I will return and keep guard over them. Come—remember that your friends are in a most dangerous situation, and have none to aid them but us," he added, leaping into the saddle.

Carmela said no more, but followed his lead, with Nicholasa, who was still weak and hysterical.

The ride did not consume many minutes, for the honest miner was strangely anxious to be free from the subtle influence which this beautiful woman exerted over him, unconsciously though it was put forth.

Carmela uttered a little cry of apprehension as they reached the spot where Fra Serapio had met the reward his evil deeds had so richly merited. Manuel Sepulveda and his son Garcia, were still lying exactly as they had been left, and she feared that they were dead. But the miner, leaping from the saddle and bending over the unconscious men, quickly relieved her dread, declaring that they both still lived.

"They are breathing more naturally, and I think we will have but little difficulty in restoring them to consciousness," he said, rising and glancing around him for a moment. "A plentiful supply of cold water is all that need be applied, and that the spring over yonder will furnish. Rude practice, but it is the best I can do, and the end justifies the means."

With a short laugh he stooped and raising the limp form of Manuel Sepulveda in his arms, with as much apparent ease as though the heavy weight had been but a bag of down, he strode through the gray light of the dawning day to where the spring gurgled forth its icy waters. A second trip conveyed the son to his

father's side, and then they both were thoroughly drenched with the cold liquid.

A few minutes' trial of this heroic treatment proved its efficacy in counteracting the dangerous drug they had drank and inhaled, for, with a gasping moan, Manuel Sepulveda opened his eyes and struggled to a sitting posture.

The first object he recognized was Carmela, kneeling beside him, in tears, and he stared at her in open-mouthed amazement. All that had passed since he sat beside the little fire, smoking one of Fra Serapio's cigars, was a blank.

"There is no time to explain the whole matter now, lady," said the miner, turning to Carmela, as Garcia also gave signs of returning consciousness. "There is danger in every moment that you linger out in these wilds. Get them into the saddle as quickly as possible, and hasten back to the Mission. There tell your story, and either send out an armed force to take possession of the prisoners, or if necessary, send on to the city. I will return and guard them until you send."

He brought up the horses, and assisted the two men to mount them. They were true Spanish-Mexicans, and the touch of the familiar pig-skin seemed to restore their confused faculties, though they were still in ignorance of what had happened them.

"And you, senor," said Carmela, pressing the miner's hand warmly. "Will you not tell me your name, that I may remember it in my prayers?"

"John Lynch,* lady—good-by, and God bless you!"

CHAPTER XV.

A FRIGHTFUL EXPERIENCE.

"Alone with the corpse of his brother—alone in a living tomb!"

Such were the terrible words that seemed to ring in the ears of the young Sonorian as he crouched over the wet, motionless body of Carlos Murieta in that dark, mysterious realm to which they had been so strangely conveyed. Just as the name of his fair young wife floated through the damp, spray-laden darkness, spurring him up to battle against the benumbing despair that was fettering both mind and limbs, so these soul-sickening words came to Joaquin Murieta, seemingly uttered by the same organs.

A hoarse cry in which were mingled despair, anger and defiance, passed his lips, and Joaquin's right hand fumbled mechanically at his belt, while the other was spread out as though to shield his brother from harm, as he glared wildly around him in quest of the owner of that malignant voice.

Hovering in the dark atmosphere above him was what seemed to be a huge eye, to his overwrought brain filled with a mocking triumph as it danced and spun around in weird gyrations, now receding until it seemed but the tiniest speck in the ocean of limitless space, only to as abruptly enlarge and draw near, its brightness concentrating in a single spark of electric power that scorched his poor brain through his seared eyeballs.

Once more the young Sonorian was hovering on the very verge of insanity. Little wonder when all that he had undergone, both mentally and physically, be recalled. But once more he was saved, this time by an actuality.

A faint, gasping moan from the lungs of Carlos Murieta—so feeble that only preternaturally sharpened hearing could have caught the sound amid that sullen roaring of waters—but it was enough. For one instant Joaquin stared about him like one dazed, then with a sobbing cry he crouched down beside his brother, raising his head to his lap, great tears of joy streaming over his haggard cheeks and falling upon the face of his brother.

"Not dead—you still live, Carlos? Blessed be God!"

"Joaquin! What does this mean? Where are we? Surely I remembered—I died—some foul fiend was hanging to my heels and dragging me down—down!"

No less dazed than his brother had been, Carlos Murieta struggled to arise, but the arms of the young Sonorian restrained him for the moment lest he should slip from the rock that alone separated them from death.

"We still live, you and I, brother," in a soothing tone uttered Joaquin, "miraculously saved from what seemed inevitable death, by some strange means which I have not yet fathomed. Where we are, or how we came hither, I know not."

"The sun was shining when I leaped into the water—and now it is night! Yet the water is roaring around me—we are on a rock in the midst of that awful current—yet alive! I cannot understand! I heard that devil in human guise shout for his minions to fire upon us—"

*As he was—and is, bless God!—I have here described John Lynch, an honest man and one of nature's noblemen. We have not met for years in the flesh, but the love with which he inspired me, grows stronger rather than weakens with the passage of time. A truer friend never lived—and though his nut-brown locks are now very frosty, his heart of gold is still as young and light as when, years ago, he rode on the death trail of Joaquin Murieta!

their lead fell in hissing showers upon the water, and I felt that I was hit—yet you say that we still live! Raymon Salcedo must have seen us drift against this rock, and if so—no, no, Joaquin! we are both dead, and this is purgatory!"

Joaquin felt more fear now than he did when he knew that he stood hovering on the brink of madness, for he believed that the brain of his brother was giving way beneath the frightful experience they had undergone. With a powerful effort at self-control, he managed to emit a clear, cheering laugh as he firmly grasped the arm of Carlos, and pointed upward to where the clear light of day shone down through a small rift far above their heads.

"See, brother, there is the daylight we left only a few minutes ago. The world is not so far away as you seem to fancy. Come, tell me what you remember after taking that desperate plunge behind my back, and let us both try to clear away the cobwebs that obscure our brains!"

"You were so obstinate—I could think of no other way," muttered Carlos, still looking upward at that bright rift in the gloom, scarce conscious of the words he uttered.

"I know—you thought to save my life by sacrificing your own," said Joaquin, with gentle reproach in his tones. "It was not right, after agreeing to draw lots to see which one should make the first venture. But let that pass. You cried out—that first shot must have struck you—"

"No—that I expected, and could have borne without a cry or moan," quickly uttered Carlos, more like his usual self. "But I had scarcely touched the water when it seemed that a thousand devils had fastened upon me, and were trying to tear me limb from limb! I felt them dragging me down beneath the surface, their deadly gripe growing tighter the more desperately I struggled, and this unexpected horror it was that wrung that craven cry from my lips."

Joaquin Murieta drew a long breath of relief as he listened to these words, spoken with a convulsive shudder. They not only confirmed his own frightful experience, but that the brain of Carlos was growing clearer and more steady. He could not have taken a wiser course, and, feeling this, he pursued it still further.

"Yet you could not feel anything more solid than water when you struck out with your feet?"

"No—demons are not like men," was the low response.

Joaquin forced himself to utter a clear, cheerful laugh, and his grasp grew firmer as he felt Carlos shrinking from him with an involuntary fear.

"Courage, brother," he cried, deriving benefit from the very efforts he was making on behalf of his more superstitious companion in misfortune. "Do not fear that I am going mad—instead, I feel as though my sober senses were just returning to me. I, too, had the same experience—I, too, felt that my limbs were being rent asunder by devils or some frightful water monsters that had darted upon us from the black depths—but I was afraid to mention it, lest the wild words should confirm the suspicion I already harbored that I was going mad. But now I see it all! The light comes to me, and I firmly believe I can explain all that has so sadly puzzled us both!"

"The Blessed Virgin grant it," muttered Carlos, but, fervent as the exclamation sounded, Joaquin knew that his brother still doubted whether all was well with him.

"You remember how, when those stones began falling, you looked out upon the water and decided that our only chance of escape lay in taking to it?"

He felt, rather than saw, Carlos nod affirmatively.

"You remember, too, how swiftly the water ran, how madly it boiled and bubbled as though the fierce heat of a burning mountain was exerted upon it from below? And the sharp bend in the canyon only a few rods below where we lay?"

"Of course! I am not a babe, nor an idiot. But what do you mean, brother? I feel that you are injured—"

"In my brain?" and Joaquin laughed once more—strange sound in such a situation. "No, Carlos, never fear on that score, for with every moment my brain grows clearer, and I am more perfectly convinced that the theory I have formed is the right one."

"Then I must be growing crazy, for devil fly away with me if I can make head or tail of your meaning!" irritably cried the elder brother, shrugging his shoulders pettishly.

Joaquin felt that his adroitly played for point was fairly won, and now that Carlos seemed himself once more, he came to the point at once.

"Listen, brother, and I will try to speak plainer. At that shoulder in the canyon the pent-up waters divided—"

"Are you mad? There was only one channel—"

"Only one that could be seen, I admit," interrupted the young Sonorian in turn, "but I will

stake my life that there was a second one, and that we have found it!"

"You mean—"

"Just this," confidently affirmed Joaquin, as Carlos hesitated, doubtfully. "The water has dashed against that rock wall for ages, until at length it cut a passage underneath—how far, can only be guessed. Perhaps it ends here in this cave, perhaps it runs on until the outer world is again reached; which, of course, I am unable to say."

"It was this that made the waters boil and eddy so madly just below where we lay. The hole eaten out of the rock must be small, since no plainer evidence was given of its existence, and the crowding of the waters to get through it caused those boils. It was this, too, that made us both think we were being dragged down by water demons or monsters!"

For a moment Carlos Murieta crouched upon the spray-dampened rock of refuge in silence. His was a superstition too strong to be easily crushed out, but as he gradually became convinced that Joaquin was correct in his reasoning, a glad cry broke from his lips. He could face any ordinary peril without flinching, and make as stout a fight as the best against any purely material danger, but when assailed by superstition, he was weak and credulous as a child.

Joaquin read the cry aright, and in the darkness he found and clasped his brother's hand with an earnest gripe.

"It was truly a frightful experience, brother, and one through which the love of life could hardly tempt me to pass again; but now that it is past, may be all was for the best. We are both alive, and those human bloodhounds are cheated of their revenge—"

"Is that so sure?" and Carlos uttered a short, hard laugh, as the troubled waters bubbled up to their feet with a louder roar than usual.

There was no need for him to say more. Joaquin read the rest easily enough, but though their future looked black and cheerless, his buoyant spirits would not let him despair while the faintest ray of hope remained.

"Bah! the trail ahead can't be much worse than that behind, and we passed over that without anything worse than a scratch or two. At least I did—but you brother?" and his voice grew unsteady with strong anxiety. "You were hit by those accursed bloodhounds?"

"Not seriously. One or two bits of lead a little more than barked me, I think, but nothing more," was the careless response.

Joaquin was not so easily satisfied, and his pulse did not resume its normal tone until he made a careful examination of his brother's person by the sense of touch. He himself had received several slight flesh-wounds, but no bones were broken or even touched, extraordinary as it may seem when the number of shots fired at them while struggling in the water is considered.

"Better than could reasonably have been expected," was his cheerful verdict. "The cold bath has stopped the bleeding, too, which is still another point in our favor, for we may require all our powers to win our way out of this trap."

"A death-trap, I'm afraid!" muttered Carlos. "But one consolation: Raymon Salcedo—may the devil make his bed!—will not have the pleasure of insulting our bodies."

"We will yet meet him face to face on more equal terms, and bring him to a stern reckoning—never fear," confidently declared Joaquin. "But cast aside all thoughts of him for the present. We must leave this place, somehow. If we can only reach that opening, we are all right."

As he spoke the young Sonorian gazed upward to the rift which was almost directly above their heads. It shone less distinct now, for the sun was setting, but even at its best, the little light that entered could not penetrate the intense gloom that shrouded the subterranean lake sufficiently to reveal aught of its natural features.

"We may be on the point of a ledge," said Carlos. "Stay quiet where you are, brother, close to the water, so that I may know when my exploration is complete."

"Be careful of that false step may send you into the water," cautioned Joaquin, but Carlos, reassured now that there was work to do, stepped forward.

"Be easy, I mean to creep, not walk," he said, and, almost at full length, he began crawling along the water's edge, feeling of and thoroughly testing every foot of space before he trusted his weight upon it.

Slowly as he proceeded, the exploration was a short one, and the report he made was far from reassuring.

"We are on an island of rock, not more than a dozen feet in diameter, brother!"

"Well, it's one point settled, at any rate," said Joaquin, with a feeble attempt at a laugh. "The next thing to find out, is to learn how far we are from the walls of this den."

"That's easier said than done!" muttered Carlos.

"True, but still not impossible," was the cool response. "Feel of the rock we are on. It is soft—slate, I imagine. I still have my

knife. With it we can dig out bits heavy enough to answer the purpose. Your ears are better than mine. As I dig out the stone, do you throw them straight ahead of you, as nearly as you can at the same rate of speed. Mark where they strike the walls, and if you can, distinguish when they fall back on something more solid than water."

Carlos comprehended all, now. The idea formed by Joaquin was simple but ingenious. By following his plan, they could tell at which point the wall was nearest them, despite the intense gloom which enveloped them as with a pall.

Steadily the bits of slate were cast through the darkness by Carlos, sometimes a single throw being sufficient, at others repeated attempts being foiled by the roaring of the troubled waters. But they were men working for dear life, and Carlos never shifted his position until he had gained his point.

In this manner he had made nearly half the circuit of the rock, and consequently had formed a more or less accurate idea of the distance which separated their refuge from the cavern wall for at least one half of its extent, when a startled cry broke from his lips.

"What's the matter?" anxiously demanded Joaquin, but there came no immediate reply.

Instead, Carlos moved to the very verge of the rock, where the swiftly flowing waters fairly lapped his feet, and sent another bit of slate through the darkness; his sense of hearing painfully strained. Above the sullen roaring of the waters he could detect the faint sound as the missile struck against solid rock—but nothing more. Again and again, with the same result, then as Joaquin repeated his question, Carlos spoke in a tone that was unsteady despite his utmost efforts at calmness.

"Dig me out a larger chunk, brother. Take your time. We have all eternity before us."

These words conveyed a suspicion of the truth to Joaquin, but he wasted no breath in speech. Desperately he cut and slashed at the stubborn stone, then succeeded in freeing a fragment weighing several pounds. He arose as he handed this to Carlos, and as the missile sped through the gloom, they both listened with bated breath.

A dull *thud*—then a rattling sound as the fragments, broken from the missile as the solid wall was struck, fell among a sort of shingle, not into the water!

"I was almost sure, but that settles it!" uttered Carlos, with a long breath of relief. "There is solid footing over there, and if we can only reach it, there may be a chance for us to escape, after all!"

"We will reach it!" impulsively exclaimed the younger brother. "And once there, we are bound to escape. I have never doubted that, from the first. Now I am sure of it."

"May you prove a true prophet, brother; but don't let us lose our heads now, and maybe ruin what chances we have by a rash step. Dig out some more slate, and I'll see how wide the water is here. It seems like a mill-race, and if the distance is great, it will be dangerous work crossing."

Joaquin was cool enough to realize the prudence of this suggestion, and at once returned to his work. The process was a slow and tedious one, but at the end of an hour, Carlos expressed himself satisfied.

"Not more than thirty feet across it, I feel sure," he said, thoughtfully. "It sounds very slight, but if the water is as deep as it is swift, it might as well be a mile!"

"Bah! one leap, and we are over!" cried Joaquin. "A single dive would carry us there, without swimming a stroke, no matter if the water ran twice as swift."

"You forget our experience in the canyon," was the serious response. "Only for that, I would think the same as you. In that terrible grasp we were helpless as though petrified. It may be the same here. Or there may be rocks in the way to dash our skulls against. No—your plan will not do, or at least we can only try it when all else fails."

"How then?" impatiently demanded Joaquin. "We have not wings—we must pass through, not over the water."

"It is barely possible that we can wade across. Give me your sash. I will knot it and mine together, then we will tie the ends one to your belt, the other to mine. You will brace yourself here, while I slip down and try if the water is shallow enough for secure footing. Not a word—I am the heaviest, and so can hold my own against the current better than you can. Quick—your sash, brother!"

Joaquin rarely disputed the will of Carlos when the latter spoke in the tones he made use of now, and removed the sash of stout China crape from about his waist.

It was firmly knotted to the one furnished by Carlos, and the ends secured as he advised. Then he cautiously slid down into the whirling waters, Joaquin bracing himself to sustain the expected strain. But this did not come; instead:

"Blessed be the Virgin! brother, the water is barely knee-deep!"

Instantly Joaquin was beside him. The bot-

tom was firm, but slippery, and the water dashed against their legs with great force. And as they cautiously advanced, inch by inch, they found the depth increasing. Still, with such men, the peril did not seem extreme, and already they felt that safety was within their grasp, when some floating object struck the younger brother with great force upon one leg, causing him to stagger and fall at full length, with a sharp cry of pain!

Instantly his body was swept away by the swift current to the end of the united sashes, before Carlos could realize what had occurred, and the heavy shock toppled him over.

Piercely, madly they struggled, but all in vain. They could not regain their footing. The raging torrent hurled them along, tossing them about as in mad glee, now buried beneath the surface, now tossed almost clear of the element, but all the time bearing them swiftly on to what seemed inevitable death!

CHAPTER XVI.

OUT OF ONE TRAP INTO ANOTHER.

AFTER that one cry of mingled pain and horror when he felt his feet knocked from under him, Joaquin Murieta uttered no further sound, but fought as only a brave, strong man can fight for dear life, yet his efforts seemed all in vain. He could not regain his footing upon the slippery rocks. The mad waters bounded against him, shutting off his breath and threatening to dash in his ribs, now lifting him clear of the surface, only to hurl him down again until he touched the treacherous bottom where no hold was granted his hands, no stay for his feet. He knew that death was almost inevitable, yet the bitterest portion of all was the knowledge that by his fall he had also doomed his loved brother to share his fate.

Twice during that brief space, the turbulent waters had dashed them together, only to hurl them asunder again before their friendly gripe could tighten. Both were fighting desperately, but how fruitlessly! As well might a puny infant hope to cope successfully with an enraged giant!

Something like this occurred to our hero, as wild fancies will often flash across the brain when the body is hovering between life and death, but the thought went no further. He would not yield while life remained, but die fighting against fate.

At that instant the whirling waters dashed him against a point of rock, to which his hands instinctively clung, despite the fact that the heavy blow had almost deprived him of breath. He felt the solid bottom beneath his feet, and drawing one swift breath, he clinched his teeth tightly and nerved himself for the terrible struggle which he knew was coming. There was no time for more—no time for improving his position or to renew his grasp upon the sharp rock that already seemed cutting his fingers to the bone as the capricious waters tore and tugged at his body as though regretting the slight advantage they had yielded him. One fleeting instant, then the swift current carried the body of Carlos Murieta to the full extent of the united sashes.

Though expecting the shock, Joaquin was well-nigh torn from his hold upon the rock-point. His feet were jerked from beneath him, and with the body of Carlos trembling and tossing wildly at the end of the crape rope, he hung to their one chance for life with the tenacity of utter desperation. His bleeding fingers were growing numb. His arms seemed on the point of being torn from their sockets, while every nerve and muscle was stretched like one undergoing the barbarous torture of the rack.

One instant of that horrible suspense—then Joaquin made an effort that could only find birth in some such critical emergency. Just how it was accomplished, not even he, himself, could have described, but his feet once more secured a hold upon the slippery rocks, and now he fought the unequal fight with less certainty of defeat.

It may have been only fancy, but now the waters seemed to whirl along more swiftly, to mutter louder threats, to swirl and eddy even more treacherously than before. One instant that horrible strain would be relaxed, and Joaquin could snatch a breath to renew his strength—only to feel his brother whirled away again and with a shock that bent him double, the stout belt to which the sashes were tied, threatening to cut his body in twain.

Time and again did this occur, and on each occasion Joaquin had to fight more desperately than before, to retain his death-gripe on the point of rock, for the terrible strain was steadily sapping his strength, and he knew that the end must soon come, in spite of all he could do.

Was it the devil that whispered to him then? "Better that one should perish than two! Cut the sash and let him go. He is already dead. You cannot aid him now. Live, to avenge him on Raymon Salcedo—live, to guard and protect his wife—and remember Carmela!"

Clear and distinct as though they were shouted in his ear by a mortal voice, Joaquin Murieta heard these words. So naturally did they

sound that his lips parted to reply, when once more the wild waters strove to tear him from his hold. Just as the maddened shark strives by a series of furious plunges to free itself from the rankling hook, so now the waters, enveloping Carlos, used his weight to conquer his doggedly resisting brother. For nearly a minute the terrible contest lasted, then another eddying swirl brought the young Sonorian timely relief.

None too soon. Though his courage and will were still unshaken, his bodily strength was almost exhausted. And then, when he was weakest, the tempter came again.

"Now—while the waters are quiet! Cut the sash and save yourself before all is lost. He is dead. One more struggle like that, and you too will die! Cut the sash!"

Plainer than ever did Joaquin hear that phantom voice, and he knew, too, that by following the advice given, he might save his own life. Freed from the terrible strain of the tossing body, he could easily better his position. He could take advantage of the lull of the waters, and release one hand to snatch the knife from his belt. A single touch of its keen edge against the crape would be sufficient, and then the whirling waters would do the rest.

So real did this voice and its specious reasoning seem to the overwrought brain of the young Sonorian that he shouted forth a fierce and indignant spurning of the temptation. An answering cry came back—faint and gasping, but to Joaquin's ears sweeter far than the tenderest love notes at that moment, for it was the voice of Carlos—his brother was still alive!

Again the eddying waters turned into an impetuous flood roaring sullenly as it assailed the poor, overmatched hero who was doing such glorious battle for his brother rather than himself. Heavier and at briefer intervals came those sickening shocks about his middle. At each one his body was forced to yield a trifle—inch by inch he was bowed out and away from the point of rock. His feet were slipping. His muscles were aching with the terrible strain. A red light danced before his vision and the air seemed full of grinning, dancing, mocking imps. His feet gave way—first one, then the other. For one moment he was stretched out at full length, sustained only by the gripe of his bleeding fingers—then the angry waters howled and tugged more furiously.

One instant thus, then Joaquin was conquered! A cry, half-despairing, half-defiant, burst from his lips as he was swept away—then he felt himself come in contact with his brother, and instinctively their arms closed around each other as they felt once more the relentless gripe of the water-devils pulling them down to death!

But the end was not to come after that fashion. Better for their loved ones, better for both friends and foes, if neither of the Murieta brothers had emerged from that frightful ordeal alive. But the hand of fate was in it all.

With a gasping sigh, Joaquin Murieta opened his eyes and stared vacantly around him. The sun had set, and the high hills as yet cut off the light of the full moon. All around was dark, save for the twinkling of the stars.

He was wet, cold, his limbs benumbed, yet aching in every fiber as though suddenly afflicted with rheumatism.

For the moment he knew not where he was—had lost all remembrance of what had transpired—but he strove to arise, and was dragged down again by the sash that was still knotted to his waist. And by that his senses were fully restored. A wild cry burst from his lips as he fell upon his knees beside the corpse-like body of his brother, seeking for signs of life. And then, as he saw the stars reflected in the wondering eyes of Carlos, his strength failed him and he burst into tears, hot and scorching.

Carlos gradually recovered his strength and memory, though he had suffered even more than his brother during that frightful ordeal. That either of them lived was a miracle. They had been swept into the cave by one narrow cleft, then tumbled from another and much farther down to be cast ashore on a low sandbank where the divided river made a bold sweep to the broad valley below.

All this was not understood by either of them at once. Bruised and battered, at first moments of stupid amazement they were still in the land of the living. Attention was given to the hurts of each other. Strange as it may seem, no bones were broken, nor were the brothers so injured that they would be unable to travel, though every exertion now was a cause of more or less pain.

Carlos was the first to regain his usual spirits. "Come, brother, we must be up and doing. It is a long trail to Sacramento, yet—"

"To the Mission, you mean!" interrupted Joaquin. "You forget your wife. Raymon Salcedo believes we are dead, now, and he will strike his next blow in that quarter."

"Nicholasa is safer in the care of Manuel Sepulveda than she would be with us," gravely responded Carlos. "As you say, that imp of Satan considers us—", and in that belief he

will be in no haste to strike a fresh blow, but rather wait and watch for a sure chance. While he is doing this we will deal our first blow at him. It will be all the more bitter from coming so unexpectedly. Before he can even suspect that we are still alive, we will find our witnesses and prove our right to the land he falsely claims is his.

"Another argument. No doubt he and his hounds are on the road between here and San Francisco. We might stumble upon them at any moment, and with only knives—our pistols useless, our powder wet—what sort of fight could we make? No—we must strike for Sacramento, and there fit ourselves out again. Once there, we can buy horses and ride on to Hangtown, find Florez—"

"Have your own way, brother, but if Carmela was threatened by such a devil in human shape, I could think of nothing else until he or I were dead!" said Joaquin, ignorant of the fact that even then the cunning toils of an enemy even more to be dreaded than Raymon Salcedo were being drawn closely around his loved one.

Carlos carried his point, as he usually did, and swimming across the stream, the brothers set out on their weary tramp to the city of Sacramento.

They met with no adventure by the way that is deserving of record here, and though each step was one of positive pain, they doggedly persisted, reaching their goal finally, but looking more like ghosts as they staggered up to a lodging-house kept by one of their countrymen. Pale and haggard, hardly able to speak, they gained admittance and fell rather than lay down to sleep.

They scarcely stirred during the rest of that day and the night which followed, only awaking when the sun was well up in the sky, faint with hunger, but otherwise feeling not much the worse for what they had undergone.

While breaking their long fast, Carlos entered into conversation with the Mexican host, learning what before he had only surmised, that there was no regular stage line running between Sacramento and Hangtown.

"We must buy horses or mules, then," he declared, turning to Joaquin. "But first, to find a good gunsmith."

The host gave them the necessary directions, and leaving the house, Carlos tossed a silver coin into the battered hat held out by a miserable-looking cripple before the door.

"Poor devil! go in and get something to eat and drink," he said, passing on; but instead of silver, steel would have been bestowed had Murieta suspected the truth!

Two of their revolvers had been lost during that terrible fight for life in the underground torrent, and when the gun-shop was found, other weapons were purchased to replace them. Ammunition was also bought, and the weapons loaded ready for use.

Scarcely was this done when a clear, shrill voice was heard outside, mingling with the clatter of iron-shod hoofs.

"Hyer's yer chainece, gentlemen! Anybody what wants a prime, number one hoss critter fer toride, eat or sleep with, fer bafe less then nothin', wants to look this-a-way! Bound to sell 'em ef I don't git a cent! 'Cause why—made my pile an' goin' to 'tire from business—goin' to strike a bee-line fer Frisco, an' from thar home to see my old woman an' young'un! Good critters, an' fer less money then it'd take to buy a squar' hug from a dried-up old maid! How much fer all three both on 'em? How much fer ary one as ye fancy most? Speak up, gentlemen! Time is money, an' I got a heap more o' the last than t'other! Bound to sell, even ef I hev to give 'em away an' then pay ye thar heft in dust fer takin' of 'em! Good hosses an' good cl'ar titles. How much do I hear ye breathe?"

All this was rattled forth almost in a breath and as the brothers hastened out of the gun-shop, the auctioneer drew rein before them, managing two led horses as well as the spirited animal he bestrode with ease and grace.

"Look 'em over, gentlemen," he cried, his keen eyes detecting the intending purchaser as Carlos and Joaquin pressed through the crowd that was rapidly collecting. "Zamine 'em close. You'll find 'em clean as an angel's conscience from ear-tip to fetterlock! Look at thar teeth an' smell thar breath—sweeter then new-mown hay or the sigh of the gal ye love harder then a mule kin kick frozen punkins down hill! Rides easier then a cradle, an' chain-lightnin' couldn't scorch a ha'r o' thar tails in a ten-mile chase, fer rocks!"

"You say you can give a clear title?" demanded Carlos.

"Raised 'em both on the bottle, boss. Ef ye don't b'lieve it, hyar's the papers from the man I bought 'em of only last night!"

"If you only bought them last night, why do you wish to sell now, and at a forced sale, too?" suspiciously.

"Look here, boss," and the fellow leaned over in the saddle, a half-sheepish smile on his face. "The joke's on me, but it's too good to keep. I come down from the diggin's day afore yist'day—made my pile, ye see, an' thought I'd light out fer home an' the old woman an' young'un."

But I thought I'd have one good jamboree afore I pulled out. So I did—I got fuller 'n a billed owl, an' one o' the boys put up a job onto me—waal, I should say he *did*!

"Ye see, I used ter to be a boss-jockey afore I come out here, an' that made the trick easy to play. They putt me up to it, an' durned ef I didn't b'y up every boss, mule an' ridin' critter they was fer sale in town, to bull the market, ye know. An' all the time I was plum drunk! Soon's I sobered up, I found nigh two hundred hosses on my han's, fit to eat thar heads off every day, sence I've got nothin' fer 'em to do to airm thar grub."

"Now ye see why I'm bound to sell, cl'ar myself or not. Highest bidder gets 'em. Speak out—how much do I hear?"

"Stop. I will buy these two horses, and pay you the same sum you gave for them, if I am satisfied that the title is all right. Will you accept my offer?"

"You bet! an' say thank' into the barg'in!" exclaimed the jockey in delight at his good fortune. "Come right 'long to the gent as I bought 'em of. Everybody in town knows him, an' he's squar' as a die!"

The Murieta brothers followed as the fellow rode off, congratulating themselves on having fitted themselves out so well, for the animals were really first-class for that place.

The man who had sold them was readily found, and had no difficulty in proving the title clear. In any affair of money his bare word would have been more than sufficient, but where horse thefts were so frequent and so swiftly punished, the brothers could afford to run no risks.

Satisfied on this point, the price, a fair one for both parties, was paid by the brothers, saddles and bridles were procured, and with their saddle-bags well stored with provisions for the long ride before them, they parted with the quaint-talking horse-jockey and rode out of town, heading for Hangtown.

"So far, so good, brother!" cried Carlos, gayly. "One more step taken along the trail that is to end in the utter defeat, if not death, of that imp of Satan, Raymon Salcedo!"

He would not have spoken so exultantly had he even guessed at the truth. At that moment a man was gazing after them, an evil light in his eyes, a smile of devilish triumph curling his thin lip and revealing his white teeth—the same man whose name Carlos pronounced—Raymon Salcedo!

CHAPTER XVII.

DIRTY DICK IN A NEW ROLE.

"WHAT the devil do you mean, anyhow? Have you gone crazy?" demanded Raymon Salcedo, as he wrested himself free from the grasp of Dirty Dick.

But that worthy made no response until, after a hasty glance up and down the street, he closed the door and fastened it securely behind him. Then, with a long breath of relief, he sunk into a chair motioning his master to follow his example.

"Ef ye don't set down, ye'll tumble when I tell ye—the devil's own work, an' no pitch hot, nuther!"

Raymon Salcedo knew that no ordinary cause could so powerfully affect this old sinner, and at once jumped to the conclusion that the part they played in the road-agent line had come to light. Dirty Dick accurately read his thoughts, and promptly banished the idea.

"Wuss'n that, a durned sight! Look at me cluss, boss. I ain't drunk. I ain't looney. I ain't dreamin'. Yit I tell you honest that I've bin seein' ghosts an' spooks an' dead men, all lookin' as live an' well as you do this minnit—Take it easy, boss!" he exclaimed, leaping to the side of his young master, as he saw Raymon Salcedo turn ghastly pale and stagger back as though dealt a mortal blow. "We kin easy kill 'em over ag'in—"

By a violent exertion of will, the Californian rallied. His voice was low and husky as he demanded:

"Speak plain and short. What do you mean? What have you seen or heard?"

"What I'd 'n' swore was a lie, ef I hadn't seen it with the two eyes o' me, boss. Jest afore I met you, I see them two Greaser critters walkin' into town—"

"Not Carlos Murieta and his brother?" gasped the Californian like one dazed, unable to believe his ears.

"Jest them two dirty cusses," confirmed Dirty Dick, with an emphatic nod. "Nuther could I believe it at fust, though the p'izen cusses almost run chuck ag'inst me afore I see'd 'em. They was mighty onsteady onto thar pegs, like they was drunk—clean tuckered out, I reckon."

"If you were sure, why didn't you knife them?" growled Salcedo, his eyes glowing.

Dirty Dick shrugged his shoulders significantly. There was a limit to even his devotion. To kill two men in the crowded streets of a city like Sacramento, under the broad glare of the noon-day sun, was almost too much to expect of him, and the young Californian quickly realized his unreason.

"I believe I am the one that is going crazy," he said, with a short, forced laugh. "Of course

I didn't mean that, Dick, but are you sure there can be no mistake? It does not seem possible that they are here and alive! How could they escape? We watched for hours, and they never came to the surface after we poured in the lead!"

"Tain't often I open along a wrong trail, boss," quietly responded the old scout. "The fust glimp' struck me nigh about as hard as it hes you, but then I thought mebbe the p'izen imps mought run onto ye when ye wasn't thinkin', so I plucked up an' follered close ahind. It wasn't no very hard job to dog 'em, fer they never once looked ahind 'em or to the right or left, but jist plugged on like men 'most asleep. I marked 'em down at a sort o' hotel kep' by a Greaser, then sot off to find you."

During this explanation, and for several moments after Dirty Dick ceased speaking, the young Californian sat with bowed head, buried in deep thought. Then he started up, all doubt and hesitation banished from his face.

"Go and bid Pedro come here. The work must all be done over again, and this time I swear there shall be no mistake or blundering. Quick! give him the old signal that there is work on hand, and then hasten back."

Dirty Dick glided away, but returned in the course of a few minutes, accompanied by a tall, slender Mexican of about middle age. This man was one of the Salcedo retainers, whom Raymon knew could be trusted. He had formed one of the road-agent party, and was well acquainted in and around Sacramento.

Raymon Salcedo quickly explained the wonderful discovery made by Dirty Dick, who added, when called upon:

"They went into the 'Prickly Pear,' the place was called—"

"I know the place," and Pedro gave a grimace of disgust. "Old Sanchez keeps it now. He had a plump young wife, who had the good sense to like me better than she did him. The old fool swore on the cross to fill my skin full of lead if he ever laid eyes on me agaln."

Salcedo uttered a fierce curse of disappointment.

"One moment, senor," added Pedro, quickly. "True it would be very unhealthy for me to venture near the Prickly Pear, as I am now, but if your good requires it, I agree to throw dust into old Sanchez's eyes once more—"

"What is he? Will gold buy him?"

"Not to do aught that endangers his neck, senor. The old fool is too big a coward not to be strictly honest."

"Kin you rig yourself up so that you kin hang around the shebang an' give the word whenever our game makes a move?" asked Dirty Dick.

Pedro nodded, with a confident grin.

"Skin out then, an' do it."

Pedro glanced inquiringly into Salcedo's face. The young Californian turned to Dirty Dick, but if he had any doubts, what he saw in the eyes of the old scout resolved them. He nodded to Pedro, who glided away to play the spy. And he made his boast good, for the crippled beggar to whom Carlos Murieta gave alms, was none other than this accomplished rascal.

As soon as the spy vanished, Raymon Salcedo turned to Dirty Dick and impatiently demanded:

"You have taken it upon yourself to direct this affair, setting aside the plan I had partly formed. Of course you have not acted without good cause, but I don't care to be left in the dark where so much is at stake. Speak out."

"Time a-plenty an' to spar!" deliberately replied Dirty Dick, pulling out his pipe and filling it preparatory to taking a smoke. "If them was live men I see'd, an' not spooks, they ain't a-goin' to do any knockin' about afore to-morrow. They was clean tuckered out. They'll drop down an' sleep till another sun, sure."

"They must never waken again in this world!" snarled Salcedo, his handsome face changed to that of an angry fiend.

"I knowed that was what you'd say, boss, an' fer that reason I tuck charge o' the affair," seriously added the old man. "You can't ketch men like them two in the same trap twice. It'd be mighty poor satisfaction to kill 'em an' git rubbed out yourself while doin' of it, or to be lynched by a howlin' mob a'most afore they hed give thar last kick."

"Then suggest a better plan," growled the Californian.

"You kin raise a smart pile o' dust ef you need it?"

"A mule load, if necessary, from my friends in town. But why do you ask? To hire men to kill those devils? I'd rather shut off his wind with my own hand!"

"You shall see the rope do that, an' laugh at the critter as he gives his last kick, ef you like!" grinned the old sinner.

"Make your word good, and name your own reward!" cried the Californian, excitedly. "Even if it be half my fortune, you shall not be refused!"

"Drop that, boy!" and the old man's eyes glittered keenly. "Tain't fer dust I'm mixin' up in this job, an' I don't sarve you fer wages. You should know that, long afore this!"

Raymon Salcedo understood, and warmly

clasped the hand of the man whose love made him a criminal.

"Let it go at that," and Dirty Dick released the young man's hand after a hearty gripe. "Go now an' raise some money. It may take a smart pile, but you'll be able to git the most on it back ag'in when the job is did. Git enough, then come back here. I've got the right plan rough-blocked out, an' while you're gone, I'll polish up the details so you kin read it all off at a glance."

His confident tone deeply impressed Raymon Salcedo, who had before this been benefited by the shrewd wits of the old man. To none other would he have yielded so easily, but he left the building now in full confidence that all would turn out to his entire satisfaction.

He had spoken truly when saying that he could raise almost any sum of money in the city on his bare word. Many of the heaviest dealers in town were well acquainted with him, and had been with the elder Salcedo before his death. They knew that the Californian had ample wealth, and as money was then very plenty, not a single refusal met his requests.

In a short time Raymon Salcedo returned to his lodgings, nearly weighted down with gold dust and coin. Nor had Dirty Dick been idle during the interval, and the Californian started back in amazement as his eyes rested upon Richard Sleeper—Dirty Dick no longer!

The old man laid aside the little round glass in which he had been peering when Raymon entered, and there was a half-sheepish smile upon his weather-beaten face as he spoke:

"Reckon I'll hev to interduce myself, won't I? Clean Dick, boss—new Dick, dandy Dick—old Dick as feels meaner nor the devil afore day! Hope I won't ketch my death o' cold—but it's a powerful reek I'm runnin', shore!"

Washed clean, his skin scrubbed until it fairly shone, his beard shaven closely, his dirty, greasy suit discarded for "store clothes," including a white shirt and collar! Little wonder that Salcedo stared, almost doubting the evidence of his senses! Small marvel that Dirty Dick squirmed about, feeling something like a fish out of water!

Despite the anxiety which he felt, Salcedo sunk into a chair and laughed long and heartily. Dick grinned sheepishly at first, but then turned hot and uncomfortable, snarling:

"Heaps o' fun fer you, ain't it? A durned old fool I am! Shet your cacklin', or durned ef I don't send you an' these yer duds all to the devil together—so thar!"

Instantly Raymon smothered his mirth, speaking seriously:

"I ask your pardon, father Dick, but I couldn't help it—"

"Nur I don't wonder," grinned Dick thoroughly placated by the title he so dearly loved to hear from those lips. "It'd make a cast-iron monkey grin his tail off, jest to see. But, all the same, it ain't no great fun fer me. Feel like I was kivered from top to toe with a mustard plaster, sprinkled all over with fleas an' bed-bugs! Money wouldn't hire me to wear the p'izen things one minnit—"

"Then why punish yourself?" asked the Californian, thoroughly perplexed to understand what the old sinner was driving at.

"When I goes into a thing, boss, I goes in all over, head an' ears an' toe-nails," earnestly replied Dirty Dick. "At fust I didn't rightly know the kind o' game you was huntin', takin' them to be jest the common run of Greasers. I know 'em better now. They ain't common men, an' no common traps 'I ever ketch 'em ag'in, but I've trapped cunnin'er four-legged critters then thar ever was two-legged, and I'm bound to fetch these 'ere, or bu'st somethin' tryin'."

"You know what they sot out to do, an' whar they was bound fer. That they still hold the same notion, is proved by thar comin' on here when it was so much furdur then to go back to Frisco. They ain't no way to git to Hangtown, 'cept by critter-back, unless they hoof it, an' the Greaser never lived that would walk a mile when he had money enough to buy a hoss, or saw a chance to steal one."

"Course thar's plenty o' hosses an' mules here. But the fellers hev got plenty o' dust, fer I saw 'em packin' it into thar belts. Fust thing they'll want to buy a hoss, an' I'm goin' to sell jist what they want."

"Don't be so sure of that," gloomily uttered Salcedo. "They may be acquainted here, and apply to a friend to supply them. Hoss-dish is ticklish property now, so much stealing is being done. And they will be doubly careful now, after having had such a narrow escape."

Dirty Dick listened with a smile of quiet confidence.

"You'll find it jist as I say, ef only you'll back me up in my trick. I ain't tuck all these pains fer nothin'. 'Twasn't altogether 'cause I feared they mought recognize me as one o' the men that helped to hold 'em up back thar, fer I reckon they was too busy to pay much 'tention to faces or figgers jist then. Listen."

"I've jist come down from the diggin's, hev'in' made my pile. I'm on my road to Frisco, goin' home, but I run onto some old mates here an' git on a high-toned old jamboree. Fust

thing is to rig out in States style from top to bottom, 'cause I'm rich an' want to show it. Then comes a big drunk, an' right thar I'll git in my pritty work.

"Ye see, afore I come out here to dig my everlastin' fortune, I was a boss-trader. I lets this out when I'm drunk, or else one o' my mates knows it a'ready. Anyway, I pitch in an' buy up every ridin' critter thar is in town that money'll tech. I kin do that afore sundown, ef you furnish the dust."

"That is here when needed," said Salcedo, unloading his precious freight. "But I must confess that I am still in the dark. Suppose you securo all the hosses—what then?"

"Why, then them Greasers kin only git hosses of me, don't ye see?" and the old sinner grinned with diabolical cunning.

Raymon Salcedo stared at him dubiously, as yet unable to divine his meaning. Dirty Dick was not ill pleased that such should be the case, for it was a silent confession of his superior cunning.

"Pedro 'll fetch us word when the Greasers crawl out o' thar holes, an' I'll be ready. Course I sober up afore then, an' findin' out what a bloody fool I've bin, I want to 'spose of my live stock. I take two of the best hosses an' stumble in thar way. I want to sell, I must sell, an' they want to buy. I'll make the terms easy for 'em, give 'em a clear title, an' send 'em on rejoicin'—to thar deaths!"

"Curse your circumlocution!" snarled the Californian, unable to longer restrain his impatience. "Come to the point, if you can. In one word, what do you mean?"

"One word, nur yet one dozen words won't tell it any plainer, boss," coolly retorted the old man. "Thar's time a-plenty for all the work, an' I ain't goin' off at half-cock no more while dealin' with them critters. Too much o' that's bin did a'ready, or they'd both on 'em be cold enough now."

"I sell 'em the hosses an' give 'em a clean title, 'cause they're too smart to buy hossflesh without. But you kin make out papers on them same hosses aforehand an' give 'em to your two best men. Send 'em on to Hangtown, an' thar spread the 'scription of the animals as was stolen from me by a couple o' Greasers—hal you begin to see it now, eh?"

Raymon Salcedo leaped from his seat, hardly able to choke down the wild yell of vindictive joy that rose in his throat as he recognized the diabolical cunning of the old man's scheme. Not a weak spot—not a flaw—all was carefully prepared and provided for. Success was sure—there could be no failure. And the end was equally certain. Hangtown had terribly earned its name. It would not belie itself now. Taken red handed, his enemies would be given short shrift and a long rope!

In his insane joy, he flung his arms around Dirty Dick, and together they whirled about the room in a mad dance, ended only when the old man broke away with a short laugh.

"Time to git down to business, boss. Go send up a couple or three men you know kin play a good hand. Thar mustn't be any mistake made now. The trap's too good to be spoiled."

It is not necessary for us to follow Dirty Dick on his pretended jamboree, particularly as the reader has already seen its cunning termination played to perfection, for the auctioneer who sold Carlos and Joaquin Murieta their horses, was indeed none other than Dirty Dick.

Enough to state here that those particular animals were selected to bear the brothers to their death, simply because the former owner was a man of high standing and well known in town, whose guarantee that the title to the horses was perfect, was sure to satisfy even the most suspicious buyers. And before the sun set, two men, furnished with carefully forged papers describing those horses, were riding hot haste for Hangtown, there to play their part in the fiendish plot that was fated to end in the death of two innocent men.

It was this knowledge that caused Raymon Salcedo to smile and laugh like a devil as he gazed after his unconscious enemies as they rode away from the city.

Then, leaving a trusty man to dispose of the animals for which he had no further use, he too took the saddle and headed for Hangtown, to make sure that his victims did not escape.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A VILLAIN STILL AT LARGE.

It would be no easy or agreeable task to paint in words the emotions which racked John Vanderslice as he saw the long coveted, dainty morsel snatched from between his very jaws, just as he was beginning to taste its exquisite flavor. To come so near the perfect fulfillment of the bitter revenge he had vowed to wreak upon the young couple who had covered him with disgrace and ruin, yet to have the glorious cup dashed rudely from his lips before he could fairly sip of its contents—that was bitter almost as death!

He was bound, gagged and helpless. Yonder lay the ghastly corpse of Parkhurst, his boldest

ruffian. Beside him feebly moaned the miscreant who had been disabled by the shot fired by John Lynch. But one man save himself had escaped without serious bodily injury, and he lay bound hand and foot, unable to aid himself or any other.

Scarcely had the door closed behind John Lynch, and the two women whom he was protecting, when John Vanderslice thoroughly tested the efficacy of the bonds that held him. His bodily strength was great, but the skin thongs had been thoroughly applied, and were stout enough to baffle the powers of a grizzly bear. Stubbornly the gambler strove to free himself, but all in vain. Then, worn out, shuddering in every fiber as he began to feel how slender were his chances of escaping an ignominy as death as the reward of his crimes, John Vanderslice yielded to a stupor of abject fear and despair.

It may be doubted whether death itself would have been one-half as bitter as the punishment he endured each minute while lying thus, expecting the return of the honest miner with Manuel Sepulveda and his son, to bear him away to suffer the just penalty of his sins. But his evil race was not yet wholly run.

Lying close against the rear wall of the log cabin, where the chinks were unusually wide, John Vanderslice became conscious that something or somebody was creeping along the outside of the cabin. The shuffling sound drew nearer, then entirely ceased, directly opposite where lay his head. And then, as he strained his sense of hearing, the gambler could detect the faint puffing of lungs. He even fancied that he could feel the hot breath fan his cheek.

One moment of breathless suspense as he doubted whether this came from human or animal, friend or foe—then a joyful remembrance flashed across his mind, and with a desperate effort, he rolled over on his back, where the dim light of the dying fire could fall upon his features.

He remembered that Raymon Salcedo had promised to send one of his men to the rendezvous with word of how his plan to entrap the Murieta brothers had succeeded. If this should prove to be the expected messenger—and who else would be prowling around the lonely cabin at that hour!—all might yet be well, and his bitter defeat still be retrieved.

But not a sound came from without, and as minute after minute passed by the gambler's blood grew cold with fear and bitter disappointment. Surely if a friend, this prowler would have given some sign of recognition ere this! Then, as he heard a hand fumbling at the door, hope was born of fear once more.

The reader will remember that, when fully satisfied both Carlos and Joaquin Murieta had perished, Raymon Salcedo dispatched the squat-built, red-haired ruffian, Ben Hardy, to keep the rendezvous given John Vanderslice, bidding him spare not his horse, but to ride with a free rein and bloody spur. Knowing that he was serving a generous paymaster, Ben Hardy literally obeyed his orders, and but for an accident that crippled his horse, he would have reached the lone cabin in ample time to have taken a part in the combat out of which John Lynch came with flying colors. As it was, he lost so much time that when he drew near it was only to see the honest miner riding away with the two girls.

He only obtained a glimpse of the party, barely sufficient to recognize them as human beings. Whether they were men or women, friends or foes, he could only surmise, and the cunning rascal valued his own hide too highly to run any unnecessary risks. So, instead of hailing them to satisfy his doubts, he turned and stole toward the log cabin.

"Ef it's long John, he's got the gals an' made a ten-strike, and he'll feel so good that my news'll keep a little longer 'bout sp'illin'. Ef 'tain't him, then I don't want no truck with the critters, fer when this job comes to be 'quired into, my reputation ain't good enough to bar much 'spicion, an' I might hev to lie too hard in explainin' why an' wharfore I come to be 'round yere."

Ben Hardy redoubled rather than relaxed his caution as he neared the rendezvous. Keeping well under cover, and in the densest shadows, he finally reached the rear of the building, and peered in through one of the many chinks.

Almost the first object that met his curious glance was the upturned face of Parkhurst, showing grim and ghastly in the flickering fire-light. A discolored spot on the temple, turned toward the startled spy, from which still oozed mingled blood and brains, only too plainly told the cause of his death. A faint, muffled moan sounding almost beneath him drew Ben Hardy's attention from the dead to the living, and by slightly changing his position, he was enabled to recognize John Vanderslice.

It was the slight noise attending his movements that the gambler heard, his hot breath that fanned his cheek for a moment, and his hand that cautiously tried the door, after thoroughly satisfying himself that there were no enemies lying in ambush.

The padlock, hasp and staple which held the door fast were stout and substantial, but now

that he was satisfied he had the field to himself, Ben Hardy did not stand long on ceremony. Selecting a heavy stone such as few men could handle, the burly rascal hurled it against the barrier with signal effect. The fastenings were torn away and the splintered door hurled open, the heavy missile thundering across the floor and barely missing the head of John Vanderslice.

Startled by the loud crash he had made, Ben Hardy leaped into the building and hastily severed the bonds that rendered the gambler and his two comrades helpless.

John Vanderslice was the first to regain his feet, and without pausing to thank his rescuer he stumbled across the room to the bunk into which John Lynch had cast the weapons taken from them. Armed and able to defend himself the gambler sunk down on the rude bed and burst into a frightful torrent of curses and blasphemy. Even Ben Hardy, no mean proficient in the art himself, stood aghast with open eyes and mouth as he listened to the flood of imprecations poured out upon the sturdy gold-digger.

The other men were more practical. They too made a dive for their weapons, and the one with a shattered hand paused only long enough to say:

"Outside! that born devil may be coming back with those two men to help him—out, take them as they come up!"

The last words scarcely left his lips ere he passed the door, and as he was promptly followed by his mate, Ben Hardy uneasily added:

"Good advice, boss; an' we'd better pucker up too, I reckon. I kin speak easier out onder kiver—"

"Who and what the devil are you?" snarled the gambler, seemingly forgetting how much he owed the fellow.

"Ben Hardy—Raymon Salcedo sent me hyar to meet you."

"And he—he has failed, too?" eagerly demanded Vanderslice.

But Ben Hardy did not pause to answer. Few men who led such a life of sin and crime ever valued their hide as highly as did this red-haired ruffian. When the proper time came, he would fight like the veriest bulldog, but he loved not danger for danger's own sweet sake, and took good care to run no unnecessary risks in cold blood.

And after his first burst of furious rage had expended itself, John Vanderslice was not over eager to await the return of the dauntless miner, even with the odds of four to one in his favor. He strode across the room and grasping a couple of brands, hurled them into the grass-filled bunk, then left the building and rejoined his men.

He found them crouching under cover beside the narrow trail leading from the cabin, their weapons in readiness to shoot down the gold-digger should he return, as they confidently expected, with Manuel and Garcia Sepulveda, to convey them back to receive the penalty of their outrage, and kneeling down beside Ben Hardy, he muttered:

"Your report—be brief and to the point."

The red-haired ruffian obeyed him literally. In common with his fellows at that moment, he had not the slightest doubt but that both of the Murieta brothers had perished. John Vanderslice was not so easily convinced, perhaps because he had so much more at stake, and he questioned Hardy closely, only to have his lingering doubts completely expelled. He did not say much, but the depth of his fierce joy could easily be fathomed by the evil light that filled his eyes, the satanic smile that curled his thin lips and revealed his white, wolfish teeth.

By this time the cabin was blazing furiously, casting a brilliant light over surrounding objects, and the men lay closer in ambush, expecting with the passage of every moment to behold the gold-digger and his new found allies rushing along the narrow trail to save those whom John Lynch had left helplessly bound. Their patience was rewarded, but in a very different shape from that which they anticipated.

Crack—crack! A pistol bullet tore its way through the skin of John Vanderslice's shoulder, close up to his throat, and another glanced viciously from a rock in their midst.

"Skin out, ye cowardly bloodhounds!" came a clear, defiant shout from the hillside behind them—a voice that three of the party had no difficulty in recognizing. "Run, ye devils! but I'll make it hot for ye for burning an honest man's shanty—mind that, now!"

In that one instant, John Vanderslice realized what a mistake he had made in setting fire to the cabin, thus placing the man he had sworn to kill on his guard. Instead of blindly rushing up to his death, on locating the fire at his cabin, as they calculated he would do, John Lynch had suspected something near the truth, and circling round, gained a position from whence he was enabled, by the light of the blazing building, to look down upon the enemy and foil their plans. A single glance convinced the rascals that it would be certain death for one or more of their number were they to attempt a charge on the daring gold digger, and with wonderful unanimity they leaped to their feet and fled at top speed, the long legs of John Van-

derslice enabling him to distance his less favored comrades in a very few minutes.

Mocking yells and a few pistol bullets followed them, but if a more serious pursuit was attempted, the fleeing villains never became aware of the fact.

The day was dawning when they fled, and half an hour later they came together again, somewhat shame-faced, but secretly overjoyed at having gotten clear so easily.

John Vanderslice entered San Francisco in far different guise from that in which he left it, on foot, haggard and in a sadly dilapidated state. He was not certain what steps might be taken to avenge the deeds he had committed, and resolved to lie low for a few days until his spies could inform him exactly how matters stood.

Almost anything is possible to a man who has plenty of money at his command, and John Vanderslice was a liberal paymaster. As a natural consequence he was well served, and in less than eight-and-forty hours, he learned enough to bring him forth from his place of hiding.

Carriela and Nicholas Murieta had been safely escorted by the Sepulvedas, father and son, to the Mission of San Francisco Dolores, and there placed under the especial care of Father Jesus Maria. John Vanderslice scowled blackly at this piece of information, for he knew that the difficulty of the task that he had sworn to execute would be increased tenfold by this protection. But only for a brief space. Gold was powerful, and he had abundance of it at his command. The cost would be increased, but his revenge would be sweet enough in the end to more than offset all that.

No word came from Raymon Salcedo, or concerning the Murieta brothers; but the gambler borrowed no uneasiness on that score. He felt assured that Joaquin was dead, and until he had performed his part of the evil compact, he would a little rather not be confronted by the fierce young Californian.

As for John Lynch, nothing had been heard concerning him. Doubtless he had concluded that there was nothing to be made by mixing further in the affair. So John Vanderslice concluded, but the hour was close at hand when his eyes were to be opened after a most disagreeable manner.

It was quite early in the evening that John Vanderslice chose for a public appearance for the first time since the utter fiasco he had made, that he received the first intimation of a gathering storm.

Early as it was, the Wheel of Fortune was fairly filled and doing a good business. Money was plenty, times were flush, and there never lived a freer class than those hardy fellows who wrestled with mother earth for a golden fortune. Every table in the building was occupied, and John Vanderslice was in a good humor as he glided noiselessly to and fro, secretly managing the whole business though few were they who even suspected this fact, outside of his employees!

A Mexican hastily entered the room, his black eyes glowing, his sallow skin more yellow and unhealthy looking than usual. It was the same fellow who alone of the four had escaped without a scratch on that night at the log cabin.

Catching John Vanderslice's eye, he moved aside to a corner where they could converse without fear of being overheard, then broke out excitedly:

"That American devil is here!"

"Whom do you mean?" demanded the gambler. "Not—"

"Yes—that cursed gambusino—he who killed Parkhurst!"

John Vanderslice choked down a grating imprecation.

"You are sure? What is he doing?"

"Drinking with a lot of other gringos. I only stopped to be sure that it was he. I was afraid he might recognize my face—and then I thought you would like to know."

The gambler's head was bowed for a moment in deep thought. Then he looked up, and the devil was blazing in his dark eyes.

"He may not mean mischief—indeed, I don't see how he could make any—but after all it is best to be on the safe side. Listen, Antone. You have a strong arm and a sure blade. This devil is your enemy, quite as much as mine, but I am willing to pay you well for your revenge. Stop his mouth forever, and I will give you all the *onzas* you can scoop up in your two hands!"

The offer was a princely one, the man was an unscrupulous rascal, yet he hesitated. Like the generality of his class, he was a coward, and the American had proved himself a truly formidable opponent.

John Vanderslice read his tool correctly, and added:

"You know enough men who would slit a throat for an ounce. Take as many as you choose, make your own bargain with them, let them do the work if you are afraid, but remember this: if that cursed American lives to see another day dawn, you need look for no further employment from me. Go—do as you please, but I have spoken."

"It was not fear or doubt, senor, but amaze-

ment at your magnificent generosity that made me speechless," quickly and adroitly uttered the lying rascal. "Be content. The gringo shall die, even though he possesses ten thousand lives!"

John Vanderslice smiled grimly as his tool turned and glided away, for he felt sure that the morning sun would look down upon a human face, white and still in death. But his smile was swiftly wiped out of existence as Antone recoiled from the door with a cry of fear, just as he was emerging.

A tall, manly form strode into the room, brushing the Mexican aside with one sweep of his muscular arm.

"Come in, boys," he cried, in a ringing tone. "Half-a-dozen of you keep guard over the door, and suffer no one to pass out until I give the word. The rest of you stand by to see fair play between me and that man-devil, yonder!"

CHAPTER XIX.

RIDING TO THEIR DOOM.

"COURAGE, brother! the end of the trail is not far ahead. Bear up a little longer, and we will be where you can have assistance. Courage! never say die!"

The speaker was Carlos Murieta, and his encouraging words were addressed to his brother Joaquin. Bold and cheery though the words in themselves were, they sounded like mockery coming from those lips and addressed to one who seemed even more of a wreck than the speaker.

Joaquin looked more like a ghost than the physically perfect man whom we saw riding so gayly out of Sacramento City, bound for Hangtown. White and ghastly, his face pinched and withered-like, his deep-sunken eyes looking nearly twice their natural size, his form bowed and unstrung, his muscles quivering and twitching like one suddenly afflicted with the palsy.

Carlos Murieta was in but little better case, though his more matured frame had enabled him to better withstand the ravages of this mysterious malady, and it was owing only to his iron will that they kept the saddle and pressed on toward Hangtown, instead of lying down beside the trail to die or recover as the fates should will.

Neither Joaquin nor Carlos could explain what was the matter with them, beyond the fact that their symptoms would seem to indicate that they had been poisoned. And yet, that did not appear possible. Their provisions were the same they had eaten of ever since leaving Sacramento, without experiencing any evil effects until now. They had made no casual acquaintance along the road, had carefully avoided contact with all persons whom they either met or overtook, and while camping for the night one always kept guard while the other slept. And yet, that morning, both had been seized by the same symptoms—violent retching and vomiting—in short, all the indications of mineral poisoning.

For some time it seemed as though the end of their earthly trail had been reached, that both of them must die; but the very violence of the attack proved their salvation. If poisoned, they had taken an overdose which, acting as an emetic, in a measure served as its own antidote. But the effect was terrible. In one short hour, those stout men were reduced to miserable wrecks of what they had been but a brief space earlier in the day.

Whether it was because of a stronger constitution, or that he had swallowed less of the poison—if poison it was—Carlos was the first to rally from that deathly prostration.

Groaning with pain, and able to work only for a few moments at a time, with intervals of deathlike gasping and retching, Carlos managed to catch up their horses and prepare them for the road. Then he sought to rouse his brother.

"We will both die if we stay here, brother," he gasped, feebly shaking Joaquin by the shoulder. "It is not far to the Isturitz rancho—we must reach there, or die like dogs! Rouse up—remember our wives. If we yield now, we die—then think of their fate, with Raymon Salcedo still living to persecute them!"

In his utter misery, Joaquin seemed neither to hear nor comprehend this appeal. Left alone, he must have died. Carlos knew this, and the thought lent him strength sufficient to fight down his own terrible weakness. By main force he dragged Joaquin to the little spring near which they had pitched their camp, and doused him freely with the cold water, using the same medicine himself with a beneficial effect. By persistent efforts, he contrived to get his brother into the saddle, lashing him to both cantle and pommel with a lasso, to guard against his falling off through weakness. Then climbing upon his own horse with great difficulty, Carlos, leading his brother's animal, rode away.

He had visited that portion of the country not many months before, and knew that they were not many miles from the estate of a native Californian named Melchior Isturitz, whose acquaintance he had formed at that time. If their strength should hold out until they could

reach this point, he felt that there was a fair chance for their recovery.

Carlos quickly found his reward for the gallant fight he was making. With each mile that they rode, he felt better and stronger, the exercise seeming to do him good, though doubtless this was secondary to the active state of his mind, racked by the miserable plight of poor Joaquin, who seemed to grow worse instead of better. Forced to forget himself and his pangs in caring for his brother, Carlos was thus furnished with a powerful antidote in his own case.

Less and less grew the distance between them and the Isturitz rancho, and eagerly Carlos kept a look-out for some of the laborers whose aid he might entreat. Long before the rancho itself was in sight, he succeeded. Several horsemen were busily engaged among some cattle, and as his enfeebled voice proved unable to attract their notice, Carlos discharged a couple of pistol shots, then waved his scarf in token of peace.

The startled herdsmen approached, but after a hesitating fashion and an ostentatious display of weapons that spoke volumes for the disturbed state of the country. Luckily Carlos recognized one among them, whom he hailed by name, hurriedly stating their miserable plight, and begging their aid for Joaquin. The recognition proving mutual, all fears were cast aside, and as the requisite antidotes could not be obtained short of the rancho, preparations were at once made for conveying Joaquin, now quite insensible and apparently almost at the last gasp, to the building in the most speedy and comfortable manner.

A stout blanket was placed upon the ground. The lasso was cut, and Joaquin stretched out upon the blanket, another one being spread over him. This done, a horseman bent over and grasping a corner of the blanket, at a signal he and three others similarly situated, lifted the feebly moaning man from the ground and bearing him on the novel litter between them, set off for the rancho as swiftly as their well-trained ponies could run.

Carlos followed close at their heels, thinking only of his younger brother, fearing the worst yet pleased to note how admirably the herdsmen performed their duty—not a jolt was given the sick man, but he rode as easily and calmly as though swinging in a hammock.

Melchior Isturitz was the first one to greet them as the curious cavalcade swept up to the front of the wall-encircled rancho, and Carlos gasped forth a brief explanation—then his over-taxed powers gave way, and reeling giddily in the saddle, he would have fallen headlong to the ground, only for the ready support lent him by the sturdy ranchero.

"Bring the other in, too—and hunt up Juanita, somebody!" cried Isturitz, bearing Carlos into the building, and gently laying him upon a skin-bottomed bunk.

In a few moments a bent and withered-looking Indian woman entered, and carefully examined the two senseless men, then arose with a peculiar sniff-like exclamation.

"Poison, do you think, Juanita?" asked the ranchero.

"Poison, me know!" croaked the old hag, turning away to go in quest of the simples she deemed necessary.

There is no need to describe her treatment in full, though it was not devoid of interest, if only for the curious incantations, which both preceded and followed the administration of each dose. The ranchero let her take her own course, for he had implicit confidence in her skill, and for the time being old Juanita was sole monarchess of the place. Neither Carlos nor Joaquin was able to offer any resistance, and perhaps it was better so, else they might well have rebelled against taking the nauseous doses which the medicine-woman forced down their throats. But the end justified her course of treatment and ere long both patients fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion.

"When open eye, they well," declared the Indian woman, filling her pipe and squatting down upon her heels where she could watch over the slumbers of her patients.

This sleep lasted for many hours, and it was day again before the brothers roused up. Carlos, barring a little weakness and a racking headache, was not much the worse for the ordeal through which he had passed, but Joaquin, either from having taken a heavier dose, or because the poison had been suffered to work its will instead of being resolutely fought against from the outset, as in the case of the elder brother, was in much worse case. He managed to eat a little food but was unable to sit up or talk much, sleeping most of the time.

Melchior Isturitz questioned Carlos closely, but received very little satisfaction. It was clear that poison had been administered in some manner, but how or by whom he could not tell. Nor, it may be added here, was the question ever solved. Possibly it was the work of Raymon Salcedo and Dirty Dick, both of whom, as the reader is aware, rode forth from Sacramento on the trail of the Murieta brothers; but if so, why did they not complete their work, since their purpose was the death of both Carlos and

Joaquin, while the brothers were comparatively helpless from poison?

The question is easily asked, but no answer is forthcoming. The facts are given as they occurred, and as far as possible explained; but here all is obscure.

Melchior Isturitz was as full of curiosity as the proverbial old maid, and as Carlos felt that he was to be trusted, he frankly explained the purpose which had brought him to that section of the country. He described the witness he was seeking, and was not a little pleased to find that the ranchero knew him well, having seen him only a few days before, when last visiting Hangtown.

"He had been doing very well on his claim, a few miles north of town," added the ranchero, "until within a few days past, when there were indications that his claim was nearly exhausted. No doubt you will find him there still, though Florez was ever a rolling stone, and loves wine, women and cards too well to ever make a fortune."

Carlos chafed considerably at the delay, being eager to ride on, weak as he was, but Joaquin could not yet take the road, and he did not care to abandon him, even for a day or two. A handful of gold loosened old Juanita's tongue, and she said that, if necessary, Joaquin could ride on the morrow, a short trip like that to Hangtown.

It was only a short time after dinner, and Carlos was lying down asleep, when Melchior Isturitz entered and roused him with truly startling tidings.

A miner, an American, just from Hangtown on his way back to Sacramento, had halted at the rancho to noon, and Isturitz, ever curious, plied him with questions, among which were some concerning Florez. What he had learned sent him post-haste to rouse Carlos.

"Pardor, senor, for disturbing your siesta," he spluttered, with the proverbial politeness of his race when dealing with friends, "but there is no time to lose, unless you care to miss your man, Florez. He is going away—"

"When, where, and who told you?" excitedly asked Carlos.

"An American is outside, who knows all—"

Murieta waited for no more, but hastened out to where the gold-hunter was preparing to resume his journey. A rough, uncouth-looking fellow, but at first glance Carlos pronounced him honest and one to be trusted.

"You can tell me something about Florez?" he asked, after a polite salutation. "I am very anxious to find him, and able to pay well for any information you can give."

"Talk is cheap, stranger, an' I don't ax no pay fer waggin' of my tongue, when it don't go aginst my own business," was the laughing reply. "They ain't much to tell, an' you're perfectly welcome to that little. The Greas—that is, the man they call Florez, an' answerin' to the 'scription give by him yender," indicating Melchior Isturitz by a side nod, "was in town when I left, gittin' ready fer a prospectin' tour back in the hills. His claim petered out all at once—"

"When did he intend starting?"

"Right off, he said; but you cain't most always tell 'bout sech fellers. Ten to one he gits on a big jamboree fust. He's hard to beat on crookin' the elbow—"

"I must find him, and with the least possible delay. I am not sure that I would know him were we to meet face to face, even. Sir, will you confer a great favor? Will you ride back to Hangtown with me and help me to find this man Florez?"

The face of the American lengthened perceptibly, and he scratched his well-thatched scalp with an air of annoyance.

"Durn it all, stranger, I hate peskily to 'fuse a man a favor, 'specially when it's put like that, but I don't see how I kin do it. It's bad luck to turn back, an' then thar's the lost time, an' all that—"

"I will pay you your own price—ten times more than you could make by hard work in double the time," urged Carlos, eagerly.

"I ain't no durned hog, stranger, even if I do look like one," a little sharply retorted the digger. "Give me jest fa'r day's wages for the time it takes, an' I'm your man. More 'n what is jest an' reasonable, an' I won't play."

"You shall name your own price, and I will gladly double it, if you will permit me. Senor," turning to the ranchero, "will you kindly order my horse brought out? And one for this gentleman—the one my brother rode will do."

Isturitz gave the requisite orders, then added: "Surely your brother will not bear you company?"

"No—he is too ill. He is sleeping now, and need not be told where I have gone—or that I am gone—unless he insists on knowing. I will bring Florez back with me, if not to-night, then to-morrow."

In a few minutes the two horses were brought around, and Carlos vaulted into the saddle like one who had never known a moment's illness in the whole course of his life. He believed that the goal he sought was now fairly in view. Florez once found, the misty point in the title

to the land-grant would be made clear, and a heavy blow be dealt his unscrupulous enemy and rival, Raymon Salcedo.

The American, who gave his name as Dick Stevens, climbed into the saddle after a more deliberate fashion, then the two men rode away on the trail that was fated to end in death.

For an hour or more after their departure, Joaquin continued to sleep peacefully, old Juanita, who did not consider him entirely out of danger, nodding over her pipe beside his bed. Then, without a warning sound or motion, Joaquin uttered a wild shriek and leaped from his couch to the floor, upsetting the Indian hag and almost frightening her out of her senses by his sudden leap and scream.

Melchior Isturitz rushed into the room, to find Joaquin, pale as a ghost, but with a terrible light in his sunken eyes, struggling into his clothes.

"My dear friend, are you mad, to leave your bed so soon? What does this mean? What has alarmed you?" spluttered the ranchero, grasping Joaquin by the arm, only to be flung half-way across the room by a madman's strength.

"They are killing him—my brother—Carlos!" cried Joaquin, snatching down his pistol-belt from where it hung on the wall. "They have lured him to his death! I see the rope—they are hanging him! My horse! Out of the way, devil!" and he drew a revolver from its holster, threatening the bewildered ranchero. "I'll kill each and every one who dares try to stop me! They are murdering him, I tell you!"

Joaquin, for the time being a veritable madman, rushed from the room and into the open air. Melchior followed him like one in a dream, unable to comprehend what was in the wind. And as he emerged, Joaquin turned upon him, fiercely crying, and enforcing his demand by a leveled pistol:

"Curse you, you are in league with his enemies—you sent him away to his death! Bring my horse—stop!" he thundered as the terrified ranchero shrunk back. "Send one of your men. I do not trust you. Give the order—quick!"

In a quavering voice the ranchero called out to one of the bewildered herdsmen, bidding him prepare a horse.

"Move a step, or try to touch a weapon, and I will kill you," added Joaquin, in a calmer tone; but it was the ominous quiet of a dangerous madman. "My brother regarded you as a friend, and treated you as such. You betrayed him, sending him away to meet his death—"

"He would go—I could not hinder him," gasped the poor devil, only to cease speaking as the madman thrust the cold muzzle of his revolver fairly against his teeth.

"Lying will not save you, treacherous dog!" and the young man's eyes blazed like living coals. "If I am too late to find and save my brother, I will return and call you to account. For each hair of his head you shall die a horrible death. You may hide in the very center of the earth, but my hatred will find and drag you forth to—"

At this moment the herdsman brought up a horse, and Joaquin snatched the bridle-reins from his hand, leaped into the saddle and dashed out through the gateway, leaving all behind him in terror and bewilderment.

The animal he bestrode was a good one, but so peculiarly marked that had not his brain been sadly muddled, Joaquin could not have mistaken it for the one he had ridden from Sacramento. A tall, gaunt, rawboned mare, roan in its color, but spotted over the hips with red blotches, each one encircled by a regular but narrow ring of pure white hairs. This peculiar marking alone would have rendered her a marked animal in itself, but in addition only a few short, silky hairs grew upon its tail. Once seen, the creature would not readily be forgotten.*

Like the madman he undoubtedly was at that moment, Joaquin Murieta sped away from the ranchero, heading for Hangtown. He seemed to keep to the right trail by instinct, for certainly he had never traveled that part of the country before this occasion. He had only one thought—to reach the town and preserve his brother from death.

Was it a dream that had wrought this terrible change? In the days that followed Joaquin was never able to answer this question to his own satisfaction. He knew not what subtle influence had startled him from sleep and warned him that his brother was in great peril. He could never recall the incidents of that frightful ride. He remembered, like one in a dream, of having obtained a mount from Melchior Isturitz—but nothing more until he awoke on the edge of Hangtown.

Like a madman he rode on and on, never drawing rein, never noticing the objects past which he sped so swiftly, never pausing to choose his way, but keeping to the right trail through all—riding straight to his doom, even as his brother had before him.

*The sequel will make clear the reason for giving such a peculiar description of this animal.

Hangtown was before him, and even as he caught his first glimpse of the rude buildings, he heard wild yells, oaths and peals of brutal laughter. Still he dashed on, more like a ghost or a dead man than aught else. Nearer and nearer—then a wild, piercing scream burst from his lips as he wrenched his horse up until his spotted haunches touched the ground!

CHAPTER XX.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE BLOWS.

LIGHT-HEARTED and joyous, little suspecting the terrible peril which threatened him, Carlos Murieta rode into the significantly named Hangtown. Dick Stevens was only a little less eager to find the young Californian, Florez, so that he might resume his interrupted journey without more loss of time.

"We'll find the critter loafin' round some o' the saloons, I reckon, unless he's changed peskily sence I knowed him over Fiddletown way," uttered the American, glancing keenly around them. "By the Lord! yonder's the very coon now!"

"Where? Point him out!" excitedly exclaimed Murieta.

"Yonder—the tall feller in Greaser fixin's jist goin' into the ho-tel. Hooray fer us! The job's did, an' I kin git back to whar I made a turn afore dark, ef I pick up foot right peart!"

As he spoke Stevens wrenched up his horse and made a motion as if about to alight then and there. His evident eagerness to get away for the first time awakened a suspicion in the breast of the Sonorian that all was not right, and with a swift movement his right hand rested upon the shoulder of Dick Stevens.

"Wait—it is barely possible that you are mistaken in the man whom you take to be Florez. It is only a few steps to the building we saw him enter. Bear me company that far, and introduce me to your friend. We will have a glass together, and then I can discharge my indebtedness to you, as far as money can requite the kindness."

"Jest as you say," carelessly responded the American, and if he noticed the suspicion underlying these quiet words, he made no sign. "You're the boss, an' I'm at your orders ontel you say I've kerried out my part o' the contract."

Riding up to the door of the rough slab-and-canvas building, which was rather pretentiously styled the "Grand American Eagle Hotel," they dismounted and tied their horses to the long rack that stood before the door for that purpose.

Stevens entered first, Carlos following him closely, on the keen look-out for treachery, but his newly-awakened suspicions were quickly put to rest as his gaze rested upon a man in Mexican costume, the same whom he had seen enter the building, and who now turned toward the door at the sound of their hasty footsteps. Although the two men had never met before, Carlos instantly recognized the man before him, by the careful description he had received of his face and person. Beyond a doubt this was Florez, the witness on whose evidence so much depended.

"Hello, mate!" cried Stevens, advancing toward the bar. "Ain't pulled out yit, I see. Lucky, too, for here's a gent as is mighty anxious fer to see ye. Mister Florez, my friend, Mister— What might your handle be, anyhow? Fer durned ef I didn't fergit to ax afore!" and the digger turned toward Carlos with a half-sheepish laugh.

"Carlos Murieta. You may not recognize me by name, Senor Florez, but I have been very anxious to meet you. If you will be so kind as to give me a few minutes' private conversation, I will esteem it a very great favor."

"I am entirely at your service, Don Murieta," was the prompt reply, accompanied by a truly Spanish bow. "But first—you will do me the honor of joining me? And you, also, senor?" bowing to Stevens.

"Tain't often I 'dulse in the stuff what makes drunk come, but when I do, it's jest about this time o' day," said the miner, with clumsy facetiousness. "A little hornit-juice, Bob, an' you needn't be 'tickular 'bout pullin' out the sting, nuther! Waal, gents, here's lookin' at ye!"

The liquor was swallowed, and while Florez was paying for the drinks, Carlos produced a handful of gold coins, extending them toward the American.

"Take your pay, senor. You have performed what you promised, and my thanks are yours in addition to the gold. If you will wait a few minutes, we will be happy to have your company back to the rancho."

"I don't reckon I'll wait, boss. Three men is one too many fer two hosses, an' then I'd rather walk a bit fer a change. It's some slower gittin' over the ground, but thar's a heap less whar an' far on the seat of a man's britches. Critter-back travelin' is good enough fer them as has bin brung up that way, which I ain't one, an' I've got sech a dose a'ready that I'll hev to set down mighty keeful fer a month to come! Only fer that, an' the lost time, I wouldn't take no pay—as it is, putt it thar, boss, an' good luck go with you, ef our trails never cross ag'in!"

Carlos returned the warm pressure, and then Dick Stevens left the building, all unconscious of the peril he was escaping by his abrupt leaving of the death-doomed men!

"I am entirely at your service, Don Murieta," politely uttered the native Californian.

Carlos hesitated for a moment, then turned to the bar-keeper, who was leaning with his elbows on the counter, keenly eyeing them.

"Can you furnish us with a room where we can be undisturbed for a few moments, senor?" he asked, at the same time pushing a piece of gold across the bar.

"Sartin!" exclaimed the fellow, his black eyes twinkling at such astonishing liberality. "Glad to furnish a dozen rooms at the same price!"

"One will be quite sufficient for our purpose," dryly.

"Here's the key. Sorry I can't go to show ye the way, but ye see I'm alone here. But you can't go astray. The same number's on the door that the key carries."

Carlos nodded and led the way up the steep, rickety stairs, Florez following without outward sign of doubt, but he covertly assured himself that his weapons were ready to his hand, in case any treachery was intended by his conductor.

The room was quickly reached, entered and locked behind them, when Carlos, begging his guest be seated, lost no time in broaching the subject which touched him so nearly.

It is not necessary to closely follow their conversation, or to enter fully into details, for after that day no one of the Murieta family ever made a move toward reclaiming the land-grant. It is sufficient for our purpose to state that Florez proved to be an even more valuable witness than Carlos had dared hope, that he declared he could procure documents which would forever end the dispute in favor of the Murietas, and that open-handed Carlos at once engaged his services at his own figures for such length of time as should prove necessary.

All of this, with questions and answers, occupied considerable time, and more than an hour had elapsed when the two men, Florez having agreed to ride with Carlos at once to the Isturitz rancho, unlocked the door and hastened down-stairs, where the curly-headed bartender received the key with a nervousness rarely seen in one of his profession.

From outside the door came a confused, growling sound, the restless shuffling of numerous feet mingling with human voices, not loud, but deep, as though something of moment was being earnestly discussed.

Carlos, little suspecting the terrible truth, ordered liquor and cigars, and while sipping the first nodded carelessly to the door, as he addressed the barkeeper:

"Some lucky devil made a big find to-day?"

The barkeeper laughed nervously, catching up a loaded revolver and rubbing it briskly against a bit of buckskin.

"Mebbe so—I'm not sure—but I b'lieve I did hear somethin' said 'bout hoss-thieves. Mind, I won't be sure."

Carlos laughed lightly as he tossed a gold coin on the counter and waited for his change.

"The name of your town should be sufficient to warn away all such gentry. A pity there were not a few more like it. Horse-thieves are growing to be a curse to the land."

The barkeeper made no reply, but even while making change he managed to keep the muzzle of his pistol turned toward the two men, who, with the unsuspicion of innocence, if they noticed his agitation at all, probably attributed it to an over indulgence in the liquid poison he retailed to others. Most certainly they never suspected the truth, even when they reached the threshold to find themselves the target for more than a hundred eager eyes. That they should be startled was natural, as nearly every other man in the crowd had weapons drawn as though for instant use, but even then the idea of personal danger did not occur to them. If they glanced swiftly around, it was to discover the real object of this demonstration, not for an avenue of escape.

A tall, heavily bearded man, unmistakably American, strode forward from where he had been standing near the two horses, and addressed Carlos Murieta:

"Do you gentlemen claim those horses yonder?"

Carlos stared at him in surprise and resentment at the peremptory tone in which the question was asked. Always quick-tempered, the fiery liquor he had swallowed upon a weakened stomach rendered him even more so than usual. His black eyes began to glow, and his voice was hot as he spoke:

"Suppose we do? What business is that of yours?"

The American smiled grimly, and made a mock bow.

"Pardon, senor, if I seemed abrupt. I am only a rough, ignorant *gringo*, not very well posted in the ceremonious way of your people. Allow me to introduce myself: David Kipperley, present chief of the Hangtown Vigilantes!"

The angry flush died out of the young Sonorian's face, and as he cast a swift glance

around the crowd, now gradually closing in upon them, for the first time an intimation of the actual peril that threatened presented itself.

But the next moment he laughed softly. He felt himself innocent of any wrong doing, and among so many of the men belonging to the race his brother Joaquin never tired of praising to the skies as the truest, bravest and most honorable beneath the angels, surely he had naught to fear beyond, perhaps, a little temporary inconvenience.

The Vigilante chief echoed back his laugh, but there was little of mirth in his tones.

"You are amused by my name, senor; may you find an equal pleasure in my ministrations. But pardon me if I venture to remind you, in turn. Your name?"

"Carlos Murieta," came the clear, bold response.

"Both musical and romantic, so far as it goes," commented the American, in a tone that caused the young man's blood to leap hotly in his veins. "But you forget to add your title—horse-thief!"

A wonderful change came over David Kipperley as the last word left his lips like a rifle bullet. His long arms shot out, his brawny hands fastened upon the throats of the accused fore they could lift a finger in self-defense, and one herculean effort jerked them past their assailant headlong into the midst of the crowd, where they were immediately pounced upon by as many stout men as could get at them in the mad rush.

"Easy, boys!" thundered the Vigilante chief. "Disarm and bind them, nothing more. We are not murderers. Even a cursed horse-thief shall have a fair trial, so long as I run this camp!"

It may be doubted whether any other voice would have been heard, much less listened to and obeyed, in that moment, but Big Dave Kipperley was undisputed chief of Hangtown, and his lightest word was law. A terror to all evil-doers, he was the idol of all honest citizens, and never did a lively mining-town possess a better or more capable "chief." His only fault—and that fault was a virtue in those rough times—was his unrelenting severity toward all who were convicted of crime before the crude tribunal he headed.

Bruised and bleeding, disarmed and bound hand and foot, almost ere they could realize the charge that was brought against them, Carlos and Florez were carried away from the hotel to the open air "court room" of the Vigilantes. This was beneath a wide-spreading tree to whose stout limbs still depended bits of rope, some weather-beaten and frayed at the ends, others still new and bearing the marks of the knife where something had been cut down to find a rude burial in the gulch just beyond.

"Come to order, gentlemen!" cried Kipperley, leaning carelessly against the trunk of the death-tree.

With a swift celerity that told plainer than words, how often they had participated in similar scenes, the order was obeyed. Two men with drawn revolvers stood on each side of the prisoners, in the center of a cleared space directly before the judge. Twelve men silently squatted on the ground to one side, while opposite them the two horses were held, and two unarmed men stood close by.

For a brief space all was still as death. Then David Kipperley removed his hat and spoke:

"This court is in session. Any attempt to create a disturbance will be promptly punished. Prisoners at the bar, you stand accused of one of the gravest crimes known in the code of California—that of horse-stealing. How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty!" cried Carlos and Florez in a breath, then the former added, his voice clear and penetrating:

"Who dares accuse me of such a foul crime? Let him step forth, and face me like a man!"

"Have patience, my dear sir," blandly uttered the judge. "Never fear but that justice shall be awarded you. For your sake, I hope it may be entirely satisfactory."

By a violent effort of will, Carlos choked down his mad rage, knowing that any further display in that direction could only result in his own harm.

"Justice is all I ask, sir. I am innocent of the charge brought against me, as I hope to prove, even to your satisfaction."

"If so, rest assured that no man will beg your pardon more frankly, or do more in aiding you to punish your traducers than I will," was the honest response. "But this is not business. Let the two witnesses step forward."

The two unarmed men of whom mention has been made, advanced and paused at a point where they could face both judge and the prisoners. One swift glance Carlos gave them, but no recognition followed, though, as the reader is aware, both of these rascals had been among the band that attempted the death of the Murieta brothers when the Sacramento coach had been "held up."

Right thoroughly had they performed their part of the diabolical scheme concocted for Raymon Salcedo by Dirty Dick. Riding at all

possible speed, they reached Hangtown, and provided with the forged papers describing the horses bought by the Murieta brothers, they published their pretended theft far and wide. In those days, it is hardly necessary to add, since history bears ample evidence on that score, horse-stealing was often regarded as a more heinous crime than even murder, the only punishment being death. Their story was so admirably told, so well backed up by documents, that not the faintest doubt entered the minds of the Vigilantes, and when word spread that the stolen horses were tied before the door of the hotel, all other business was abandoned, and the capture made as seen.

It rather curiously happened that, though both Raymon Salcedo and Dirty Dick were in town, having overtaken and passed the Murieta brothers the night before, neither of them saw the doomed horsemen as they entered town, though it was Dirty Dick that first recognized the animals. Naturally he supposed both the brothers were inside, and he gave the pretended owners the cue to spring the trap, then sought out his master.

They were among the crowd that Carlos Murieta faced when he emerged from the hotel, but both were cunningly disguised and both escaped recognition.

For a moment Salcedo was taken aback by seeing only one of his intended victims, but then he recognized Carlos, and when he heard the name of Florez, the witness on whom so much depended, he felt pleased, rather than otherwise. He cared little whether Joaquin Murieta lived or died, if he did not trouble him personally.

"Go tell the boys to swear it on these two," he muttered to Dirty Dick, who lost no time in performing his mission.

Thus the claimants of the horses were prepared for the work before them, caring little who was hung, so long as their employer was satisfied and they received the reward.

A few sharp questions from Kipperley, who ran the primitive court to suit his own ideas, quickly brought out the story of the accusers, making a terrible case against the prisoners. But to the surprise of those who were ignorant of the truth, Carlos Murieta betrayed not the slightest sign of fear, a cold sneering smile curling his red lip and revealing his brilliant teeth.

"You have heard the charge brought against you, and the evidence advanced in its support, prisoners," gravely spoke the judge. "What have you to offer in your defense?"

"One word, your Honor," said Carlos, quietly, "before I answer your question. This gentleman beside me has not the slightest connection with the case. He never even saw either of the horses claimed to be stolen, until you confronted us at the door of the hotel. One hour before that time, we had never even met. He lives here—many of you must know that—and in the name of common justice, I demand that he be released."

"Time enough for that when his innocence is proved," coldly retorted the judge. "As you say, he is known here—rather too well known for the good of his reputation. A drunkard, a gambler—so much is known. In addition he is charged with horse-stealing, in connection with you. My advice is to defend yourself, for if ever man seemed in dire need of it, you are the person!"

"I will remind you of that insinuation, immediately after my release, sir," pointedly retorted the undaunted Sonorian. "As for my defense, I purchased those horses in Sacramento, paid the price demanded in good gold, received a receipt and clear title, both of which you will find in my money-belt, if you take the trouble to search for them."

Despite the seemingly overwhelming proof which had been brought forward to prove the charge, the judge was strangely impressed by the confident manner of the prisoner, and he took the papers from the belt himself. His face grew graver as he read, for the name signed to the document was that of a man well known in Hangtown through business dealings.

"You bought those horses of Henry Crampton, of Sacramento, you say?" he demanded, after a brief pause.

"No, but of a man who had purchased them only the day before," quietly responded Carlos.

"Then how came you by this paper? It is signed by Henry Crampton."

In a brief but clear manner, Carlos explained. "It was to guard against just such a foul trick as these lying wretches have attempted," he added.

For a moment it seemed as if the vile plot was about to crumble about the heads of those who had formed it; but Raymon Salcedo held one more trump card in reserve.

"If permission be granted me, your Honor, I may be able to throw a little light on the subject," he cried, stepping forward.

A wild cry of rage broke from the lips of poor Carlos as he heard and recognized this voice, for now he realized the full nature of the terrible snare into which he had fallen.

"Devil of hell, this is your work, Raymon

Salcedo!" he screamed, struggling fiercely in the strong grasp of his guards.

"That is my name, certainly," exclaimed the villain, with a well assumed air of surprise as he stared at the raging man, then adding, with a sharp laugh, as he turned toward the judge: "I'm afraid my reputation will suffer among those who may be strangers to me, in this crowd, unless I hasten to assure them that I never met this fellow before, that I know nothing whatever concerning him in person or character. I would not have put myself forward at all, only in the interests of justice."

"No one will misconstrue your action, Mr. Salcedo," said the judge, cordially. "You and your family are too well known throughout these parts for your bare word to be doubted."

"Thanks," and the audacious villain bowed gracefully, inwardly congratulating himself on having removed his disguise as soon as he saw his enemy secured. "I came forward because the prisoner swore he bought those horses of Henry Crampton, only a few days ago. To my certain knowledge—and I am ready to make oath to the fact—Mr. Crampton has had no such animals in his possession during the past two months. For that period I have been visiting him. I came direct from Sacramento, and only arrived here this afternoon."

With ghastly countenance and wildly staring eyes, Carlos Murieta listened to this devilish perjury, and his heart sunk within him, for he knew that nothing short of a miracle could save him from a cruel and ignominious death. At last he was helpless at the mercy of his bitter enemy.

Raymon Salcedo was one of those rare individuals who know when they have spoken enough, and with a low bow, he stepped aside, his handsome face betraying nothing of the satanic exultation that filled his heart and caused his blood to course swiftly through his veins.

"Have you any further evidence to offer?" coldly demanded the judge, addressing the prisoners.

Carlos, utterly crushed, did not raise his downcast eyes, but Florez, like one suddenly awaking from a stupor, burst into a torrent of protestations, scarcely coherent. The judge listened to his wild speech for a few moments, then impatiently raised his hand. Instantly the guards checked the luckless Californian, though using no more violence than was strictly necessary.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the evidence, and it is for you to decide whether the prisoners are innocent or guilty of the charge brought against them. If you have any doubts, or are divided in your opinion, you can retire to consult. If not, please deliver your verdict."

The foreman rose and passed from one to another of his fellows, receiving their whispered vote, then turned and said:

"We are all of the same mind, your Honor, and our verdict is that both of the prisoners are guilty."

A wild, tumultuous yell from the crowd at these words, told how universal was the approval of the verdict, but as Judge Kipperley raised his hand commandingly, every voice was instantly stilled.

"Prisoners at the bar," he said, speaking with grave earnestness, "you have heard the verdict, pronouncing you guilty of horse-stealing. In my opinion, there is not the slightest doubt of your guilt, and though it is a very disagreeable duty for an honest man to pronounce the doom of even a convicted criminal, it is a duty that cannot be avoided. Crime is flooding the land. We have no regular courts of law in these wild regions to protect us. We cannot sit still and let lawlessness run rampant. There is only one remedy—only one hope of checking crime. We must put it down by the strong hand, and make the penalty so terrible as to deter the most hardened criminals from following the evil bent of their depraved minds."

"You have had a fair trial. You have been found guilty of a crime that is universally decided a capital offense, to be expiated by death. And so, as the regularly commissioned head of the law and order party of this county, I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you are dead! And may the Lord have mercy upon your sinful souls!"

Once more that fierce yell, this time unchecked by the chief of the Vigilance Committee. With pronouncing the dread doom, he felt that his work was performed.

There were no lack of willing hands to carry out the sentence. Ropes were flung over the stout limb that had already borne more than one crop of similar fruit. The two doomed wretches were lifted upon the horses which they were falsely accused of stealing, and the nooses drawn closely around their throats. Through it all they made no resistance. A dull stupor seemed to have benumbed their senses, and though Ramon Salcedo, with satanic cruelty, placed himself where he could look full into the staring eyes of his victim, not a word, not a sign was given to add to his devilish triumph.

Then the horses were led away, and the two foully murdered men left to slowly strangle to death.

Thus fell the first of the three dread blows that were to make the Joaquin Murieta that California afterward knew!

CHAPTER XXI.

RETALIATION IN KIND.

ONCE more John Vanderslice made an important move in the game, too late to be of any service to his cause. Instead of waiting to receive the secret stab of a hired bravo, John Lynch had come to clip the claws of the wolf in his own den—for the bold intruder who caused Antone to reel across the room, who ordered the door closed and guarded, who emphasized the words "man-devil" by a finger pointing straight at John Vanderslice, was none other than that doughty gold-seeker.

Never better than a coward, even when surrounded by those in whose fidelity to his person he could repose implicit confidence, the gambler now turned pale as a corpse and shrunk trembling away from the man whom he felt to be his master in every sense of the word. At the same time he mechanically made the signal that was wont to bring his hired bravos around him when aught threatened.

John Lynch laughed shortly as he noticed the sign and read its meaning aright. With so many good and true men at his back, he cared little for whatever force the gambler might summon to his aid.

An ordinary affray would hardly have disturbed the usual course of things at the Wheel of Fortune, but every man present now felt that there was something beyond the common on the tapis, and there was a hasty reclaiming of bets from the tables as all eyes were turned curiously toward the bold intruder.

John Lynch faced them coolly, his voice ringing out clear and distinct as he spoke so all could hear and understand:

"Sorry to interrupt your sport, gentlemen, but to those among you who are honest enough to enjoy the punishment due a dirty thief of the world, I promise a full equivalent for their lost time. As for all others—the more they interfere, the more they'll wish they hadn't. After the circus is over, if any among you feel aggrieved and want redress, I guess I can pick out man for man and accommodate you."

There was no response to this peculiar address. As yet but one man present had even the faintest inkling of what lay behind it all, and he was hardly equal to an explanation just then. After a brief pause John Lynch resumed:

"It's no more than fair that I should give you my reasons for taking this peculiar mode of exposing and punishing a contemptible rascal, gentlemen. A man with plenty of dust to back him may commit almost any crime and yet get free, in these days, if he is brought before a regular court. I have neither the time nor the money to spend in trying to bring this scoundrel to justice after that fashion. Instead, I mean to strip him of the mask he has worn in the company of honest men, to brand him as a lawless dastard, and then, if he will not defend himself against the charges I prefer, I will horsewhip him clean out of his boots!"

"Name! name!" cried several of the more respectable players.

"John Vanderslice is the name he sails under at present."

The miner was cut short by the chorus of amazed exclamations which burst from scores of lips at this statement. Few men in San Francisco were more generally known among the sporting class than he who called himself John Vanderslice—known by sight and reputation, that is. And this last was that of a very fire-eater, though how the impression became so general would have sorely perplexed any one man to say.

All knew that John Vanderslice was present, and when his name was uttered in that ringing tone of scorn, many a heart leaped into its owner's throat with the expectation of a swiftly following tragedy. But instead of resenting the insult, the tall gambler shrunk still further away from his accuser, his white face the very picture of abject terror.

"John Vanderslice, of New Orleans, he prints on his visiting cards, but the name, like himself, is a lie from stem to stern. I am glad of it, too! As an Irish-American, I would be tempted to disown my adopted country if it could give birth to such a contemptible scoundrel!"

A ringing cheer greeted this declaration, and it was clear that John Lynch had made a decided hit.

"Instead of being an American, he is a Mexican—a Greaser who had command of a force of Lancers in the late war—but don't be too hard on him for that, gentlemen. He did us little harm during the war. The first time he came in sight of our boys, his stomach failed him, and turning tail he never stopped running until many a long mile lay between him and the first men he had ever seen. He resigned his command to avoid being cashiered, and being a sort of pet at headquarters, was not further punished."

"A lie—a base calumny!" the cornered gambler cried, huskily, as a chorus of laughter and sneers went up from the crowd.

"A lie given by a coward and an assassin is

no insult," coolly retorted John Lynch. "Still, I will include that in our settlement. First, I mean to complete the exposure."

"Gentlemen, what I have stated concerning this fellow, as well as what I have still to state, can be backed up by solid proofs—if any better proofs be needed than that printed upon his hang-dog countenance at this moment. He has masqueraded among honest men as a gentleman quite long enough. When I am through with him, the dirtiest sheep-killing, egg-sucking cur that lives will be ashamed to recognize him."

John Vanderslice was wrought up to desperation. He saw that this man had gotten hold of his black past—most likely through the agency of Joaquin Murieta's wife. If all was told his ruin would be complete. If that bitter tongue could only be stilled!

Without a single preliminary motion, he whipped forth a revolver and leveled it at the audacious miner.

But John Lynch was not so easily taken by surprise. With a lightning movement he leaped aside, hurling the hat he carried in his hand full into the gambler's face. The pistol exploded, but the lead sped wide of its mark, and only shattered a pane of glass. Then the powerful arms of the American closed around him, lifted him clear off his feet and dashed him heavily to the floor.

"Hold hard, gentlemen!" cried John Lynch, one foot planted between the shoulders of the stunned gambler, each hand grasping a cocked and leveled revolver, as he faced the crowd. "Keep your places until the performance is over, please, or there will be trouble, sure!"

If his word, thus backed, was not sufficient, there were a score of men, good and true, who had escorted him to the Wheel of Fortune, and their ready weapons made a formidable show. There were nearly as many of the gambler's tools and hirelings present, but they had no recognized head now that John Vanderslice had fallen, and they shrunk from what promised to be a deadly struggle.

John Lynch uttered a short laugh as he lowered his pistols, replacing them in their holsters, but still keeping his foot pressing heavily upon his overthrown adversary.

"It would be a pity for honest blood to flow on account of a dastardly wretch like this counterfeit American, but I came here to carry out a certain plan, and nothing short of death will change my intention."

"This fellow's real name is Manuel Camplido. By foul means he got a young man, a fellow-countryman, into his power, and by threatening his exposure, tried to force his victim's sister to marry him. She refused, for she loved another. And then, because her father honorably refused to use force to bring about the marriage, this heartless devil murdered and scalped him!"

A cry of execration arose, but John Lynch stilled it by an imperative gesture.

"If I could tell you the story as I heard it, from the lips of the poor girl whom he so bitterly persecuted, then you might well curse the dog—but I have neither the time nor the patience to go into details. Before I could tell half, I would lose all control of myself and stamp the life out of the villain!"

"Enough that his crimes found him out; he was taken prisoner by his rival, who married the lady who told me all this. By some means, this fellow escaped and came here. How he got money enough to set up such an establishment as this, maybe you can guess. All I know is that he owns the Wheel of Fortune."

"The most of you remember how the faro bank was broken here the other night. This wretch sent his tools to follow and murder the lucky player, partly to recover the gold, but mainly because he believed the man to be Joaquin Murieta, who had won the girl he coveted. Instead, the man was Joaquin's brother, who turned the tables on the assassins, and killed them instead of being slain."

Thus, bit by bit, did John Lynch uncover the black deeds of the craven wretch who, having recovered his senses, trembled with wretched fear beneath the heavy foot of the honest miner. The reader has had all placed before him in the preceding pages, and hence it would be a waste of both time and space to record the burning words uttered by John Lynch. Enough that not a point was forgotten or omitted, and when the recital was complete, there was not a man present, save the evil tools of the gambler, who would not gladly have united in killing the villain.

But this was not what John Lynch wanted. He did not care to have the blood of even such a scoundrel on his hands if such an extremity could be avoided.

"Easy, gentlemen!" and his voice rung out sternly as he checked the eager rush of the excited crowd. "I am not yet through. When I heard the story I have repeated to you, I swore to punish the scoundrel if we ever met face to face, but I'll have no hand in murdering him. I'm not a quarrelsome man, but I mean to have my way in this, even if I have to fight for it. For that reason, I brought along a few friends to see that I had fair play, and the out-

sider who sticks in his oar before the circus is over, will get badly left, sure!"

As he ceased speaking, John Lynch removed his foot from the back of the prostrate gambler, and grasping him by the collar, jerked him to his feet by main force.

"Now, John Vanderslice, *alias* Senor Don Manuel Camplido, one word with you. You are a dirty scoundrel, a murderer, a woman-insulting and a kidnapper, but for once I am going to put you on a level with a white man. Instead of crushing you under foot as your crimes deserve, I will give you a fair chance for your life. Name your weapons, and kill me if you can, for if you don't, I will kill you!"

The gambler shrunk away from those brilliantly blazing blue eyes, trembling like a leaf. What little manhood he ever possessed failed him now, and he looked the very personification of a craven-hearted wretch.

"You wear the shape of a man, and yet refuse to fight?" cried Lynch, his voice ringing with scorn. "Maybe this will lend you courage!" and as he spoke, he slapped John Vanderslice first on one cheek and then the other.

The gambler staggered under the blows, though they were delivered with open hands and by no means heavily. A low cry burst from his lips, but instead of resenting the insult, he stared wildly around him in search of some loophole of escape!

A storm of hisses and groans arose. Such a pitiful exhibition of poltroonery had rarely been seen, and even the evil tools of the cringing wretch began to despise him.

John Lynch turned pale as death, and felt sick at heart. To strike such a craven seemed much like assaulting a woman; but he had taken a solemn oath, and he dared not break it now.

"Toss me the black-snake, boys," he said, his voice husky and unnatural. "I swore I'd do it, and I can't go back on my word, but it looks like striking a blind cripple. Quick! I want to get it over with as soon as possible!"

A heavy leather whip was handed him, and as he drew the pliant lash through his fingers, Lynch gave the gambler one more chance.

"Pluck up courage and face me with knife or pistol. The death of a man is better than to be lashed like a dog!"

A snarling cry from the coward, then he made a desperate dash toward the nearest window, intending to leap into the street and escape by flight, but the miner's powerful hand caught and jerked him back. Then the whistling lash fell, twining closely around his body like the coil of a snake.

Twice, thrice—then, with a wild yell of mingled pain and rage, John Vanderslice leaped toward the miner, knife in hand.

Finding himself cornered, with escape impossible, the coward was nerved to desperation—but this was short-lived.

A swift motion, and the weapon was knocked from his bruised fingers by the loaded butt of the whip, then a heavy fist shot out, and catching John Vanderslice full in the throat, lifted him from his feet and knocked him headlong to the floor, where he lay, quivering like a crushed reptile.

Instantly John Lynch was beside him with upraised whip, but the threatened blow was not delivered, as the villain made no effort to arise. With a cry of disgust, the miner cast the whip back to the man who had furnished it.

"Bah! I can't touch the dirty scoundrel again. I feel now as if all the water between this and the Golden Gate would be powerless to wash my hands clean!"

"Gentlemen, the circus is over," he added, turning to the crowd once more. "It was a fizzle, but don't blame me. I hoped to give you your money's worth, and will yet, if there's any man among you that cares to shoulder the crimes of this despicable scoundrel. Come—don't be modest!"

But there was no answer. Not even one of the men who had grown fat on the gold strewn so liberally by the fallen gambler dared speak a word in his defense now.

John Lynch waited for a moment, the white heat gradually cooling in his big eyes, then, with a short laugh, he added:

"That settles it, then. A man can't very well fight alone with himself. Good evening, gentlemen. When we meet again, may it be on a more interesting occasion. Come, boys; let's go to where we can get an honest drink to take the taste of this filth out of our mouths!"

But a surprise awaited the honest digger. Ever since the gambler fell beneath that sledgehammer blow, the men who had borne Lynch company to the Wheel of Fortune were interchanging rapid whispers, and now a burly, yellow-haired fellow stepped forward as their spokesman.

"We've done our part, jist as we agreed, ain't we, pard?"

"Certainly," promptly answered John Lynch, his bronzed cheek slightly paling, not through personal fear, but because he believed there was danger for John Vanderslice in this movement, and though he had come there with the stern resolve to kill the man, he meant to do so fairly, life pitted against life.

"Then our bargain is at an end. You know we said we wouldn't raise a finger or strike a lick unless they tried to double-bank ye. That was the 'greement, eh?"

"Yes. But now listen to me. I have done what I said I would—thrashed John Vanderslice, since he would not fight me—but I'll not have a finger in lynching him. Instead, you've got to put me out of the way before you can touch him, for anything like that—"

A reckless laugh cut his speech short.

"You've struck a blind lead, mate. We ain't agoin' to tetch the dirty cuss with a forty-foot pole. Sech a p'izen coward ain't fit to die. But he ain't fit to hev so durned much property, nuther! The most of it come from us, anyhow. We hev bin skinned by the tiger often enough; now we mean to git back our own, an' as much more as we kin lay han's on—eh, boys?"

A wild yell answered this speech, and then a mad rush was made for the different gambling tables.

No one man, nor a score, could have checked them now, and John Lynch did not make the attempt. After all, it was but retaliation in kind—the robbed were turned robbers.

For a moment he hesitated. Already the miners and players alike were scuffling and fighting over the gold-laden tables, each striving to secure the largest portion of the plunder, and even at this early stage blows were being interchanged. This hesitation was not born of a temptation to join in the furious scramble for John Vanderslice's ill-gotten gains. He saw that there could be but one ending to that scene. Ere long powder would be turned and steel crimsoned with human blood. He was no money-lover for money's self, and though, like many another warm-hearted Irish-American, he was fond of a brisk fight when the spirit moved him, he cared not to kill or be killed in such a sordid *melee* as this.

"There'll be hot work before the end comes, and this cowardly cur will fare ill at the hands of those whose share proves to be more hard knocks than gold," he muttered, stooping and grasping the senseless body of John Vanderslice in his arms.

The wild uproar was causing men to flock to the spot in crowds, but the sturdy miner pressed through them and dropped his burden on the opposite side of the street, where a quantity of building material would protect it from trampling feet.

Matters were growing red-hot in the Wheel of Fortune. Pistols were exploding rapidly, oaths, cries and hoarse yells were mingling with shrieks of pain and dying agony.

Then a red glare began to spread and leap higher. By some means, whether by accident or design, the building had caught fire, and a wild rush was made to clear the frail structure by those who had not yet reached the spot where men were pouring their heart's blood over the golden coins. Pistols still echoed—the mad struggle continued, even while the flames leaped higher and the burning sparks showered upon the men raging like demons for the gold none of them were to win.

A terrified rush for the outside—then the frail roof and walls fell in. The Wheel of Fortune was no more!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECOND OF THE THREE BLOWS.

It was this horrible sight that caused Joaquin Murieta to jerk up his mare so forcibly that her stumpy tail brushed the ground, that drew such an unearthly scream of mingled horror and despair from his bloodless lips.

Above the thick clustered heads of the yelling, mocking, laughing crowd, swung the bodies of two men dressed in the gay, picturesque *ranchero* costume, all save the head-gear, which was lacking. Their limbs were still quivering with life as the unfortunate men, murdered through as foul and diabolical a plot as ever human brain concocted, swung slowly around.

At the first glance Joaquin recognized the form and garb of his brother, and now, as the murdered man faced him, he could distinguish his features, frightfully convulsed and distorted though they were.

He saw not the crowd, heard not their wild yells and brutal laughter. That swaying shape, that horribly distorted face, were the same he had seen in the frightful dream from which he had awaked, a madman, at the Isturitz rancho.

That he was mad, for the time being, there can be no reasonable doubt. By his exploits both before and after this epoch, Joaquin Murieta proved himself literally without fear, no matter what were the odds against him. He seemed to laugh at death, and his courage always rose with the emergency. But now, for the first and last time of which we have any record, he played a part wholly foreign to his usual nature.

A scream of deathly fear burst from his lips as the once handsome, but now hideous face of Carlos Murieta turned toward him, the white teeth gleaming, the great eyes protruding, glazed and fixed with an expression of unutterable

agony and terror. One moment he stared at the terrible sight, then wrenched the head of his mount around, plunged his spurs bone deep into the steaming flanks and dashed away from the death-tree at break-neck speed.

But in that brief interval of horror between his first and second cry, Joaquin Murieta was recognized by at least two men among the crowd. Simultaneous exclamations burst from the lips of Raymon Salcedo and Dirty Dick Sleeper. One brief instant of doubt, then their revolvers were whipped forth and they opened fire on their third victim, just as he wheeled in frantic flight.

"Hoss-thief!" squeaked Dirty Dick, his shrill voice rising above the tumult like the screech of an angry panther.

"A hundred dollars for him, dead or alive!" shouted Salcedo, as he saw that their shots were ineffectual, that both mare and rider sped away untouched, and leaping upon one of the horses, he thundered away in vindictive pursuit.

Of all this Joaquin Murieta knew nothing. He heard, neither the pistol shots nor the lying yells of his bitter foe. He knew not that he was being followed in mad haste by mounted men and men afoot, all thirsting for his blood. For the time being he was mad with terror. His brain was unsettled by the poison still lurking in his system. The sight of that death-distorted face had completed what his frightful dream began. He fancied that Carlos was chasing him—was making frantic clutches at his throat—was seeking to drag him down to death—and madly he lanced the bleeding flanks of the leopard-mare with his cruel spurs.

Many a wild ride was Joaquin Murieta fated to take over the hills and vales of the Golden State in days yet to come, and some of those mad races are yet green in the memories of the sturdy Argonauts of 'fifty-one and two—but wildest, maddest of them all was that ride when the frightful corpse of Carlos Murieta seemed to pursue.

On, on like a demon he dashed, passing the Isturitz rancho without recognizing or even seeing it or the astonished men who stared after him. On, on, not knowing whither the leopard-spotted mare was bearing him, still plying the blood-dripping spurs, still feeling the cold, clammy clutch of the dead man's fingers at his back.

A terrible race, but one that no sane pen can even faintly describe. It lasted for hours, until the sun was going down, and many miles had been traversed. The leopard-mare seemed mad as her rider, seemed urged on by the same haunting fear rather than the rankling steel. She flew, rather than ran. Her muscles seemed made of tempered steel, tireless and unailing. Mile was piled upon mile, long after even Raymon Salcedo and Dirty Dick, superbly mounted though they were, had abandoned the chase as hopeless.

But then, as the sun hid himself behind the pine-crested ridge, the leopard-mare, no longer feeling the spurs, slackened her furious speed, though still moving on, with drooping head and painfully heaving flanks, leaving behind her a trail of bloody froth and sweat.

Joaquin Murieta, the mad fever that had racked his brain beginning to die away, leaned far over in the saddle, swaying from side to side with each motion of the mare, like a drunken man, knew not that he was drawing near one of the many nameless mining camps that sprung up like mushrooms in a night, to die as suddenly as they found birth, when the golden deposit failed, or tidings came of another richer "find."

This "camp" was situated close beside a stream of water, and consisted of some two score tents and brush huts. The weary diggers were just knocking off work for the day, when the leopard-mare entered the camp, stopping short with a glad whinny.

At the sound, or perhaps because of the cessation of motion, Joaquin Murieta roused up and stared around him like one suddenly awaking from an oppressive dream, wild and long-gard-eyed. He saw the tents, saw the rough-clad miners running toward him, heard their loud shouts, and for a moment he fancied himself back at Hangtown where the face of his murdered brother grinned awful threats—and with a choking cry of fear, he tightened the bridle reins, plunging the red wheels once more into the scored flanks—but it was not to be. A painful, sobbing snort from the leopard mare as she refused to stir, other than to spread her legs wider to support her trembling body. And then a powerful pair of hands closed upon the luckless Sonorian, while an excited voice shouted:

"Hoss-thief! May I be totally durned ef it ain't my old mar' come back ag'in! Hyar, boys—No ye don't!"

At that dread epithet, *horse-thief*, Joaquin once more sprung into life and energy, for he knew now that death threatened him. He jerked his arm free, and whipped forth a revolver, but before he could use it, or do more, the tall, muscular miner grasped him around the waist and tearing him from the saddle, hurled him to the ground. Terribly weakened by all that he had undergone, Joaquin was but

as a child in the grasp of his enraged antagonist, and would have been badly handled, only for the prompt interference of the other miners, who dragged the angry fellow off.

"Don't murder the poor devil, Ned Butler, horse-thief or not!" cried one of the men. "He may have come by the horse honestly enough, even though it was stolen from you."

Joaquin caught these not unkind words, and feeling confident that he could prove his innocence, he ceased his struggles and quietly submitted to be disarmed and dragged over to one of the more respectable looking tents.

This belonged to the young man who had spoken in his favor, and his partner, Ned Butler, the man who claimed the leopard-mare as stolen property. Together they had first discovered gold in paying quantities in this quiet valley, and though they were soon scented out by other prospectors who located claims above and below them, the two mates were still regarded something in the light of "city fathers."

Less than a month before the leopard-mare had been stolen, or else strayed away; almost certainly the first, for the bond of love between her and her owner was deep and strong. All search had failed to recover her, or to learn anything concerning her, until now she came home again, bringing with her a man who seemed drunk or mad.

Will Kearney motioned the men to release their prisoner when fairly inside the tent. They obeyed, but reluctantly, and hung around the frail structure, crowding the entrance, their faces black and brows lowering, their hard hands fingering their weapons significantly. It "may be in the air," but it is a stubborn fact that nearly every Western man considers a horse-thief the lowest and most vile of all criminals. That it is not a mere matter of education by or transmission from father to son, is proven by the fact that the generality of Eastern men only require a short acclimation before they become quite as rabid on this point as those born and bred on the sunset side of the Missouri river.

Joaquin returned these angry glances with an air half-defiant, half-bewildered. As yet he did not fully understand what had occurred. All the past seemed a hazy chaos—he could remember nothing clearly between that ride from Sacramento and his being hurled to the ground by big Ned Butler.

"Where did you get that horse, my man?" asked Kearney, yielding to the growing impatience of the miners.

"Where am I? who are you?" slowly uttered Joaquin.

"The dirty Greaser's thinkin' to play off crazy onto us!" cried one of the diggers. "Give the cuss a good hick'ry warmin', an' I reckon he'll find his tongue fast enough!"

These words and the angry chorus which followed them, more than all else served to restore the scattered senses of the young Sonorian. A brighter, keener light came into his eyes. Memory was returning to him by degrees. He turned to Will Kearney, and spoke again.

"I have been sick, senor, and I fear I did not fully understand you. Will you kindly repeat your question?"

"I asked you where you got that horse," replied the young man, but the strange demeanor of the young Sonorian made him believe the rough-spoken miner had nearly hit the truth, and his voice grew colder and sharper.

"I bought and paid for it, senor," was the prompt reply.

"Be careful. The mare was stolen from this camp, nearly a month ago, and all our search could learn nothing concerning her, until you rode into camp just now."

"I bought that horse in Sacramento, and I have the papers to prove—"

Joaquin paused abruptly, even as he thrust a hand into his bosom after the documents, and a look of horror overspread his face. Carlos had the papers last, and he—!

"My brother—Carlos!" gasped the wretched victim of fate, as he remembered when and where he had left his brother.

"What of him? what about your brother?" demanded Kearney.

"Dead—they hung him! Mother of God! I can see his poor face even now! Carlos—my brother!"

Joaquin flung up his hands and covered his eyes as though to shut out that horrible vision. He trembled in every fiber, then sunk back in a quivering heap, sobbing and moaning.

A coarse laugh broke the spell which had fallen over the spectators, and the man who had suggested flogging, uttered:

"Pritty well played, but it won't pan out wuth a cent! Ef he's got the papers he says, let him show 'em. Ef not, an' he can't prove whar he got the old mar', then I says he's the durned thief. No honest man in these times'd buy or trade fer a critter marked like she air, unless the title was good."

Will Kearney bent over the prostrate man and shook him by the shoulder. It was an unlucky move for him. With a wild yell, Joaquin leaped to his feet, and dashed his clenched fist full in the young miner's face, knocking him clear off his feet, then made a mad rush at the

crowd that filled the entrance, only to be knocked down himself.

Once more he would have fared but ill, only for the interference of Will Kearney. His face was bleeding freely, for the hard knuckles of the young Sonorian had cut to the bone, but he rescued the accused at the muzzle of a revolver.

"Stand back, or some one will get hurt!" he cried, sternly. "He may be a horse-thief, but he shall have a chance to explain, or you must run over me, first!"

"Me too!" cried Butler, forcing his way into the tent, and ranging himself alongside his partner. "I want to know how the dirty cuss stole her, afore we hang him."

This, more than the bold defiance of Kearney calmed the crowd. They only asked for what they believed was justice on the criminal caught in the act, as it were, and assured that the end would be to their liking, peace was restored.

The struggle, brief as it had been, served to dispel the vision that haunted the overtaken brain of Joaquin Murieta, and he was more like himself when Kearney raised him from the ground.

"Twice I have saved you from death," sternly said the young miner, wiping the blood from his face. "The next time I may not be fool enough to interfere. Once more, how came you in possession of that animal?"

"I bought him in Sacramento—"

"Him?" interrupted Butler. "It's the mar' we're talkin' 'bout."

"The mare?" and a bewildered look crept over Joaquin's face. "I know nothing of any mare. I rode a bay horse—"

Butler grasped him by the collar and dragged him outside, pointing to where the leopard-mare stood, quivering violently. She recognized her master—gave a feeble whinny and made a few uncertain steps toward him, then fell heavily to the ground with an almost human groan.

A bitter curse broke from the giant, and he flung his captive back into the arms of his partner.

"Take keer o' him fer a bit. Ef the mar' dies, I'll hev pay out o' his cussed hide, even ef I hev to roast him alive!"

Will Kearney drew Joaquin back into the tent.

"That is the animal you rode here, where did you get her? You heard what he said. Unless you can prove yourself innocent, your life is not worth a pinch of gold-dust!"

"Let me think!" gasped the fated wretch. "My brain is burning—I fear I am going mad!" and he sunk down, burying his ghastly face in his trembling hands.

"Patchin' up a lie, durn him!" growled the suspicious miner.

Joaquin heard the words, and they were exactly what he needed. He leaped to his feet, his eyes glowing like living coals. For the moment he was himself again.

"You are the liar, not I. I remember, now. I was poisoned, on the road to Hangtown from Sacramento. We—my brother and I—managed somehow to reach the rancho of Melchior Isuritiz. How long I slept, or lay unconscious, I know not, but a horrible dream awoke me. I thought I saw our bitter enemies hanging him—Carlos, my brother. I demanded a horse, and one was furnished. I was like a madman, then, and I did not notice whether it was my own animal they brought. I rode to Hangtown—and there I saw that my horrible dream was true! Carlos was hanging, dead!"

"That's all I remember, until consciousness came back to me, here."

"A mighty thin story!" sneered the miner who had expressed his suspicions before. "'F I couldn't lie better 'n that—"

He was pushed rudely aside, as Ned Butler rushed into the tent, his eyes ablaze, his voice husky and unnatural.

"Whar's the cussed thief? The old mar's dead—died a-lickin' of my hand like a pet dog!"

With a fierce curse he leaped at the throat of the prisoner, but Will Kearney boldly interposed.

"Hold, Ned, or you must strike me first! He has told his story, and though it sounds incredible, yet I almost believe him. At least wait until we can test the truth of his story. It is only riding as far as Hangtown—"

"Ef he didn't steal the mar', he killed her by hard ridin'," was the dogged response. "Don't let's you 'nd me quarrel over a cussed boss-thief and a dirty Greaser, at that, mate. But quarrel we will, ef you don't give way now."

An ominous growl came from the rough crowd about the tent. Will Kearney was a brave man, honest and just as the general average, but he was not foolish enough to invite nearly certain death in defense of one whom he secretly believed guilty of the crime with which he stood charged. He saw that Ned Butler was resolved to punish the man who had killed if not stolen his favorite, and knew that the miners would back him to a man. Against such odds a fight was impossible, but he resolved to make one more effort to save at least the life of the accused.

"Mate, and you, boys, listen to me for a moment. Until now we have got along together

without quarrel or bloodshed. Even admitting that this poor devil stole the mare, which he denies, would any of you sleep sounder or have pleasanter dreams this night if you were to hang him?"

"He rid the mar' to death," doggedly muttered Butler. "He's got to pay fer that, as fur 's his hide kin do it!"

"Whip him, then, and let him go—"

"No!" cried Joaquin, fiercely. "Kill me if you will—but not that—not the lash!"

The utter horror contained in this protest no doubt saved his life. The miners meant to hang him, but when they saw that there was another mode of punishment even more dreaded by the luckless victim of fate, they hailed it with loud yells of joy and peals of laughter.

Joaquin felt that his doom was fixed, and with a cry that sounded more beastlike than human, he leaped upon his enemies, fighting furiously in hopes of being killed by some lucky blow, and thus spared the shameful lash.

But it was not to be. He was seized and overpowered, the clothes stripped from his back, and thus dragged out to the nearest tree, to the trunk of which he was securely bound, though he struggled and fought like a madman.

Only until the bonds were applied and the rough hands released his person. Then he became quiet—a terrible calm that was more repulsive even than his desperation. A ghastly smile curled his lips and revealed his white teeth as he turned his blazing eyes to where Will Kearney stood.

"You have saved my life, senor. Be sure I will never forget the kindness. Some day I will repay you all."

The words were simple enough, the tones in which they were uttered low and even musical; yet the hardy miner turned away with a cold shudder. Was it a premonition of the day of reckoning? His dreams were not pleasant that night, even though he had done his best to save a fellow-being from death.

Better for him, better for Joaquin Murieta, better for many and many a human being, had he stood aloof and suffered the rough miners to work their will unopposed. But the hand of fate was in it all!

Ned Butler, his right hand grasping a black-snake whip, his brawny arm bared to the shoulder, stood beside his helpless victim. The lash rose, fell, and a blood-red welt crossed the white back of Joaquin Murieta.

A bleeding and bruised man stood for a moment in the firelight, gazing upon the grim faces around him. Then, with a harsh, grating laugh, he turned and staggered feebly out into the darkness, nearly naked, unarmed, afoot, without food or drink.

It was Joaquin Murieta. The second blow had fallen!

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW JOAQUIN CAME HOME.

"HOLY Mother of Mercy! 'Tis Joaquin—my husband!"

John Lynch was enjoying himself hugely when this startling exclamation from the lips of Carmela Murieta brought him back to earth again by reminding him that this, the most charming woman he had ever beheld, was no longer a prize in the market, but one who had been wooed and won—whose matrimonial fetters were gladly worn.

John was nothing of a rake, nor a ranger in forbidden pastures, but Carmela had exercised a peculiar influence over him from the very first, and believing as he did, that her husband was dead—for close inquiries failed to learn anything of the two men in Mexican costume who had been left behind by the stage when "held up" by road-agents—the doughty gold-digger resolved to win her if he could.

Only for this resolution, it may be doubted whether John Lynch would have taken the trouble to hunt out Don Manuel Camplido in his guise as John Vanderslice, and play the part of champion of injured innocence, for, after all, Honest John was only mortal like the rest of us. But he knew that he would thus be insured at least one more interview with the bewitching widow, as he believed Carmela then was.

His tidings were very welcome. Carmela was a true Spaniard in her loves and hatred. She gloried in the defeat and disgrace of her bitter enemy, only regretting that she had not been there to witness the terrible punishment inflicted. This was worse than the reader as yet knows, for the mob, their worst passions aroused by the taste of gold and blood and fire, were not content with the destruction of the Wheel of Fortune, but gutted two other saloons in which John Vanderslice was interested. And as the new day dawned, a truly startling rumor steadily gained circulation to the effect that John Vanderslice, rendered desperate by the sight of impending ruin, had endeavored to check the howling mob at his last stronghold, only to be tossed into the midst of the roaring flames, there to meet a horrible death!

John Lynch investigated the rumor, and found that it was based on facts. A man had certainly met his death in the manner described, and though no one could be found who would acknowledge a share in the revolting deed, there were plenty to swear that the unfortunate wretch was none other than John Vanderslice.

Such was the report John Lynch was delivering to the two wives at the Mission, when the door opened to admit Father Jesus Maria, and a bare-headed, half-naked, pale, haggard and most miserable-looking creature.

One instant of bewildered doubt, then the eyes of love proved equal to the occasion, and with a sobbing cry Carmela was close clasped in the arms of her husband.

Poor, gentle Nicholasa, trembling like a leaf with strangely blended joy and fear, gazed eagerly toward the still open door, looking out for one who would never more return to her. At length this suspense was more than she could bear, and rising, she approached Joaquin Murieta.

"My husband—why does he not come?" she faltered.

Harsh and unnatural was the voice that made reply:

"Because he is dead—murdered—hung, like a dog!"

For one brief instant the poor girl-wife stood gazing into the sunken yet glowing eyes of the man, as though he had spoken in a language she could not understand, but then she read the black truth in his features. One sobbing, heart-rending cry, then she sunk to the floor, mercifully deprived of her senses by that terrible disclosure.

With native gallantry John Lynch sprung to her assistance, but Joaquin released Carmela and interposed.

"Back—touch her not!" and his thrust would have been a blow had not physical weakness forbade. "Look to her, wife, though it would be more merciful to let her die."

Still powerful despite his many years, Father Jesus Maria lifted the frail form in his arms and bore it from the room, followed by Carmela.

Abashed, half-angry, John Lynch confronted the ghost-like husband. Only that it seemed like striking a dead man, Joaquin Murieta would have gone down before his clinched right hand.

"Why are you here—an American?" hoarsely demanded the young Sonorian. "I loved them all once, and called them my brothers, but now—they murdered my brother, they tied me up and lashed me as you might a sheep-stealing cur! Curse them, one and all, root and branch! If I had a weapon, I would kill you. If I had my old strength, I would tear you limb from limb with my naked hands! Because you are an American like those—Carlos, my poor brother!"

With a gasping, sobbing moan, the wretched man sunk down upon the floor. He looked so much like a dying man that John Lynch stooped to assist him. But Joaquin struck at him with all his feeble strength, and even strove to spit into his face. The effort was a failure. His throat was so dry and parched that only the sound told what he would have done, but that was plain enough and John Lynch started back with an angry exclamation—just as the form of Carmela glided between them.

An appealing look from her tear-dimmed eyes was enough to disarm the soft-hearted miner, and he stood by in silence while she administered to the wants of her husband. Joaquin swallowed a little wine, and quickly rallied. Then, though Carmela tried to induce him to wait until he was stronger, he insisted on telling his terrible story.

Long before he had ended, John Lynch was completely softened, and no longer felt resentment for the manner in which he had been treated.

"It was only the thought of revenge that kept me from sinking down and dying. I could hear poor Carlos bidding me live on to avenge his foul murder. I swore to do so—I repeat that oath now. Let me once regain my strength, and I will have a life for every hair of his head! I will never spare an American!"

"One, dear husband," whispered Carmela, with a grateful glance toward John Lynch, and then she told her husband all that had transpired since his departure on that fateful journey, painting the deeds of the honest miner in such glowing colors that his cheeks flushed with mingled shame and pride.

The hard light in Joaquin's sunken eyes softened as he listened, and when Carmela concluded her recital, he extended his thin hand and feebly said:

"Except you—but curse all the rest of the race!"

John Lynch made no reply, but he felt more than rewarded by the soft light in Carmela's eyes as he cordially pressed the offered hand.

"Kiss me, wife—I am—sleepy!" muttered Joaquin, his head drooping.

The soft lips bowed to his, but he felt not the touch. His overwrought brain yielded, and he sunk into a deep and peaceful slumber.

The miner bore him to a bed, guided by Carmela, then he took his departure after she had extracted a pledge to call again.

That sleep was the means of preserving the young Sonorian's reason, if not his life. With brief intervals of consciousness, it lasted nearly a week. Each day John Lynch called, sometimes more than once, and he had many a long and earnest conversation with Carmela. They were plotting against her husband, but neither of them entertained a thought or spoke a word that could have brought a blush to the cheek of an angel. They were scheming for the husband's good, not evil.

Joaquin was literally penniless, his belt of money having been taken by the man who so mercilessly lashed him. John Lynch was also poor, but he was in possession of a golden secret, which he insisted on sharing with Joaquin, if he could be induced to abandon his mad dream of vengeance.

Nobly Carmela played her part, taking a wifely advantage of the stricken man's weakness, pleading with him at every opportunity to leave the task of vengeance in higher hands. For a long time Joaquin resisted her entreaties, but then the day came when she was rewarded and the young Sonorian retracted his insane vow.

Then Carmela made known the generous offer of their friend. Together they would go to the shore of the Stanislaus river, and work until they had gathered enough gold to take them back to Sonora. And Joaquin consented.

Ah! could they have known what terrible results that innocent plotting was to bring forth!

Nicholasa did not bear them company. Completely heart-broken, as soon as she could bear removal, she retired into the church, endowing it with her wealth, thus effectually foiling the dearest plans of Raymon Salcedo.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE THIRD AND LAST BLOW.

"DON'T make a diff o' bitterness!" doggedly muttered the red-bearded miner from Pike, who had put himself forward as spokesman for his villainous-looking party. "Might makes right, the gospel sais! We cleaned you out in this State o' Californy. We licked you in Texas, an' chewed up the rest o' your yaller-bellied tribe in the war with Mexico. We wouldn't be free-born 'Mericans ef we was to stan' by an' see a yaller-belly keepin' white men out of the best payin' claims 'long the Stanislaus—not much! We've held a talk-it-over, an' the universal decision is that you've got to pull up stakes immedjit, or else take the quinceconces. Thar ye hev it, plump an' flatfooted!"

A lone cabin on the Stanislaus river bank. Above and below were scattered tents and rude brush huts, but none within half a mile or more of this home. By some strange freak of nature, gold had been deposited thickly at this one point, but only in a space large enough to be covered by a double claim of the dimensions allowed by mining law. Above and below the earth was barren for half a mile before pay dirt was again struck, but in no part of the valley was the soil so richly impregnated as the claims held by Joaquin Murieta and John Lynch. Bitter was the envy and many the black looks given them by the other gold-seekers, but until now, nothing like positive threats or violence had been offered them.

Early that morning John Lynch had ridden away after a fresh supply of provisions, leaving Joaquin and Carmela alone. None of them anticipated trouble, but that evening, as Joaquin quit work for the day, the blow fell.

A full score of rough, evil-faced ruffians came to the cabin, and as he approached the door to learn the reason of such a formidable visit, he was bluntly told to pull up stakes and abandon his claim, unless he wished worse to befall him and his.

Several months had passed since Joaquin and his wife left the Mission, and in that time he had more than recovered his strength of body and mind, though the old reckless gayety never returned to his face or voice. He had not forgotten the horrible fate of his brother Carlos, nor yet the bitter treatment he himself had received at the hands of just such men as these, and with stern anger flaming in his dark eyes, he flatly refused, saying that his rights to the claims could not be denied, that they were regularly recorded according to law, and ending by showing his papers to prove his assertion, only to be answered in the words recorded at the head of this chapter.

A hot reply leaped to Joaquin's lips, but was checked by the gentle pressure of Carmela's little hand.

"It is true, senor, that we are from Mexico," she said, in a conciliating tone of voice, "but we have a partner who is as good and pure-blooded an American as the best among you. He is absent now. Wait until he returns, and then this dispute can be decided amicably."

"We don't want no truck with a critter as claims to be a 'Merican, yet consorts 'long with such truck as you, though it ain't hard to guess

his reason. A purty put-up piece like you, 'd tempt most anybody—"

The foul insinuation was never completed. A fierce blow from Joaquin's fist closed his mouth and knocked him endlong through the crowd.

"Kill the dirty cuss! Drag him out and massacre him!" howled the enraged gang, pressing forward as Joaquin pushed his wife back from the door and himself followed her.

They believed he was about to seek safety in flight by means of the rear door, but they mistook their man. Joaquin knew that his death had been decided upon, and his pent-up hatred, his mad lust for vengeance upon the race these villains pretended to represent, burst forth with resistless force.

Snatching up his revolvers, he opened fire upon the enemy just as they crowded into the door. Two men fell dead, and the others, awed for the moment, shrunk away. Even in that spasm of fury, Joaquin remembered his wife, and knew that her life would be endangered by the flying lead if the fight was confined to the cabin. Utterly fearless for himself, a madman for the time being, he followed up his advantage, leaping through the doorway, plying his weapons with wonderful rapidity and accuracy. At each report, an enemy fell, dead or disabled, and for a brief space it seemed as though that one fearless man would conquer the score—but fate willed it otherwise.

A tall man leaped close behind him, and dealt him a terrible blow with a clubbed revolver. With one gasping curse, the young Sonorian fell, senseless, to be pounced upon by the dastardly crowd, now bold enough and free enough with their blows.

Carmela seemed stupefied by the terrible scene, but when she saw her beloved husband fall beneath that treacherous blow from behind, when she saw the gang leap upon him, each one aiming a blow at his life, the horrible spell was broken, and with a wild shriek, she leaped forward to rescue him or share his fate.

Only to have the tall villain grasp her in his arms, with a laugh of devilish exultation as he tore off his false beard and revealed the visage of John Vanderslice!

What followed my pen refuses to place on record.

It was night when Joaquin Murieta, bleeding from a score of wounds, recovered his senses. Both he and Carmela had been left for dead, yet both lived.

Carmela, unable to stand, was lying beside him, feebly bathing his face with water from the river, to and from which she had managed to crawl, urged on by her great love.

Feebly Joaquin struggled to a sitting posture, and gazed around him. Their revenge satiated, the enemy had vanished, bearing their dead and wounded with them, but setting fire to the cabin ere they fled. This had burned down, but the still glowing coals gave light sufficient to read the terrible truth in the face of his wife.

A groan of agony escaped his lips, and roused up the dying woman. With a faint nod, she answered that frightful doubt, and Joaquin knew all that had occurred.

"Who led—which one came first?" he hoarsely muttered, raising the poor head to his breast. "Describe him—"

"Manuel Camplido—avenge me—I am dying! Hold me fast, dear husband—oh!—kiss me once more—"

Their lips met—and in that faint pressure her soul fled.

Gently Joaquin lowered her body to the ground, and then, kneeling beside his foully murdered wife, one hand upon her bruised bosom, the other uplifted to Heaven, he uttered the solemn vow that, in keeping, was to cause both innocent and guilty blood to flow in rivers!

Such, reader, is the *true* history of the three terrible blows that changed an honest man into a veritable demon.

I am no apologist for crime, but at the same time I am in favor of giving even so notorious a criminal his just dues. Joaquin Murieta, by his after life, striking down the innocent with the guilty, richly deserved the dread fate which finally overtook him, but I firmly believe that not one man out of a hundred, who really possessed the *spirit of a man*, would have turned out any better than he, provided they were forced to pass through the same fiery ordeal, and were as innocent of wrong as was Joaquin Murieta when the blows began to fall.

I cannot close this gloomy record without adding that it is founded strictly on fact. The date and order of the blows are altered, for Joaquin was not flogged as a horse-thief until after the murder of his wife, but the places where they occurred, the manner in which they fell, and the excuses given for the crimes, were all precisely as stated in these pages.

In execrating the manifold crimes of Joaquin the guilty, let us bear in mind the terrible wrongs of Joaquin the innocent. Surely, none of us will be any the worse for doing so.

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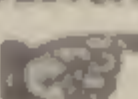
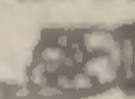
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